




THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

*Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore*

VOLUME II

SOPHOCLES

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*Oedipus the King*

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*Oedipus at Colonus*

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*Antigone*

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*Ajax, The Women of Trachis, Electra, Philoctetes*

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## INTRODUCTION

### “*The Theban Plays*” by Sophocles

THIS series of plays, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, was written over a wide interval of years. The dating is only approximate, for reliable evidence is lacking; but the *Antigone* was produced in 441 B.C. when Sophocles was probably fifty-four, and *Oedipus the King* some fourteen or fifteen years later. *Oedipus at Colonus* was apparently produced the year after its author's death at the age of ninety in 405 B.C. Thus, although the three plays are concerned with the same legend, they were not conceived and executed at the same time and with a single purpose, as is the case with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. We can here see how a story teased the imagination of Sophocles until it found its final expression. We can see the degrees of variation in treatment he gave the myth each time he handled it. And perhaps we can come to some notion of what the myths meant to Sophocles as raw material for the theater.

The internal dramatic dates of the three plays do not agree with the order of their composition. As far as the legend is concerned, the story runs in sequence. *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*. But Sophocles wrote them in the order: *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*. In view of this and the long interval between the composition of the individual plays, we would expect some inconsistencies between the three versions. And there are fairly serious inconsistencies—in facts, for instance. At the conclusion of *Oedipus the King*, Creon is in undisputed authority after the removal of Oedipus. Though he appeals to him to look after his daughters, Oedipus refrains from asking Creon to do anything for his sons, who, he says, will be all right on their own (OK 1460). It is Creon who will succeed Oedipus in Thebes, and there is no question of any

legitimate claim of Oedipus' descendants (OK 1418). But in *Antigone*, Creon tells the chorus that he has favorably observed their loyalty first to Oedipus and then to his sons, and so has hope of their devotion to himself. In *Oedipus at Colonus*—the last of the three plays he wrote—Sophocles makes one of his very few clumsy efforts to patch the discrepancies together. In *Oedipus at Colonus* (ll 367 ff.), Ismene says that *at first* the two sons were willing to leave the throne to Creon in view of their fatal family heritage, but after a while they decided to take over the monarchy and the quarrel was only between themselves as to who should succeed. At this point Creon has vanished out of the picture altogether! Again, the responsibility for the decision to expel Oedipus from Thebes and keep him out rests, in *Oedipus the King*, entirely with Creon, who announces that he will consult Apollo in the matter. In *Oedipus at Colonus* his sons' guilt in condemning their father to exile is one of the bitterest counts in Oedipus' indictment of them (OC 1360 ff.). These are important differences. We do not know anything really certain about the manner of publication of the plays after their production. We know even less about Sophocles' treatment of his own scripts. Maybe he simply did not bother to keep them after he saw them as far as the stage, though that seems unlikely. Or it is possible and likelier that Sophocles, as he wrote the last play in extreme old age and in what seems to be the characteristic self-absorption of the last years of his life, cared little about whether *Oedipus at Colonus* exactly tallied, in its presentation, with the stories he had written thirty-seven and twenty-two years earlier.

Let us for the moment disregard the details of the story and concentrate on what would seem to be the central theme of the first two plays in order of composition. And here we find something very curious. Most critics have felt the significance of the *Antigone* to lie in the opposition of Creon and Antigone and all that this opposition represents. It is thus a play about something quite different from *Oedipus the King*. And yet what a remarkable similarity there is in the dilemma of Creon in *Antigone* and Oedipus himself in the first *Oedipus* play. In both of them a king has taken a decision which is disobeyed or questioned by his subjects. In both, the ruler mis-

construes the role of the rebel and his own as a sovereign. In both, he has a crucial encounter with the priest Teiresias, who warns him that the forces of religion are against him. In both, he charges that the priest has been suborned. There the resemblance ends; for, after abusing the old prophet, Creon is overcome with fear of his authority and, too late, tries to undo his mistake. In *Oedipus the King* the king defies all assaults upon his decision until the deadly self-knowledge which starts to work in him has accomplished its course and he is convicted out of his own mouth.

Usually, as we know, the *Antigone* is interpreted entirely as the conflict between Creon and Antigone. It has often been regarded as the classical statement of the struggle between the law of the individual conscience and the central power of the state. Unquestionably, these issues are inherent in the play. Unquestionably, even, Sophocles would understand the modern way of seeing his play, for the issue of the opposition of the individual and the state was sufficiently present to his mind to make this significant for him. But can the parallelism between the position of Oedipus in the one play and Creon in the other be quite irrelevant to the interpretation of the two? And is it not very striking that such a large share of the *Antigone* should be devoted to the conclusion of the conflict, as far as Creon is concerned, and to the destruction of his human happiness?

What I would suggest is this: that Sophocles had at the time of writing the first play (in 442 B.C.) a theme in mind which centered in the Theban trilogy. One might express it by saying that it is the story of a ruler who makes a mistaken decision, though in good faith, and who then finds himself opposed in a fashion which he misunderstands and which induces him to persist in his mistake. (This story is later on going to be that of a man who breaks divine law without realizing that he is doing so, and whose destruction is then brought about by the voice of the divine law in society.) Between the *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, the theme has developed further, for in the latter play Sophocles is showing how the ruler who breaks the divine law may, for all he can see and understand, be entirely innocent, but nonetheless his guilt is an objective fact. In the third play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, this issue reaches its final statement. The

old Oedipus is admittedly a kind of monster. Wherever he comes, people shrink from him. Yet his guilt carries with it some sort of innocence on which God will set his seal. For the old man is both cursed and blessed. The god gives him an extraordinary end, and the last place of his mortal habitation is blessed forever

What this interpretation would mean, if correct, is that Sophocles started to write about the Theban legend, the story of Oedipus and his children, without having fully understood what he wanted to say about it. He may have been, and probably was, drawn, unknown to himself, to the dramatization of this particular legend because in it lay the material of the greatest theme of his later artistic life. But first he tried his hand at it in the opposition of Creon and Antigone. However, even while he did this, the character of Creon and his role in the play were shaping what was to be the decisive turn in the story he was going to write—the Oedipus saga.

Thus there is a certain elasticity in the entire treatment of myth. The author will accent a certain character at one time to suit a play and change the accent to suit another. Or he may even discover the same theme in a different myth. This is suggested by a short comparison of the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, both written in the last few years of Sophocles' life. The figure of Philoctetes, though occurring in a totally different legend from Oedipus, is a twin child with Oedipus in Sophocles' dramatic imagination.<sup>1</sup> In both these plays, the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the hero is a man whose value is inextricably coupled with his offensive quality. Philoctetes is the archer whose bow will overcome Troy. He is also the creature whose stinking infested wound moves everyone to disgust who has to do with him. Oedipus is accursed in the sight of all men; he had committed the two crimes, parricide and incest, which rendered him an outcast in any human society. But he is also the one to whom, at his end, God will give the marks of his favor, and the place where he is last seen on earth will be lucky and blessed. This combination of the evil and the good is too marked, in these two plays, to be accidental. It is surely the idea which inspired the old Sophocles for his two last plays. There is, however, an important further development of the theme in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. For there in Oedipus'

mind the rational innocence—the fact that he had committed the offenses unknowingly—is, for him at least, important in God's final justification of him. Sophocles is declaring that the sin of Oedipus is real, that the consequences in the form of the loneliness, neglect, and suffering of the years of wandering are inevitable, but that the will and the consciousness are also some measure of man's sin—and when the sinner sinned necessarily and unwittingly, his suffering can be compensation enough for his guilt. He may at the end be blessed and a blessing. This is not the same doctrine as that of Aeschylus, when he asserts that through suffering comes wisdom. Nor is it the Christian doctrine of a man purified by suffering as by fire. Oedipus in his contact with Creon, in his interview with Polyneices shows himself as bitter, sudden in anger, and implacable as ever. He is indeed a monstrous old man. But at the last, he is, in a measure, *vindicated*. Yet in *Philoctetes* the theme of the union of the offensive and the beneficial, which in *Oedipus at Colonus* becomes the curse and the blessing, is seen without the addition of conscious innocence and unconscious guilt. Can we say that Sophocles finally felt that the consciousness of innocence in Oedipus is the balancing factor in the story? That in this sense *Oedipus at Colonus* is the further step beyond *Philoctetes* in the clarification of the dramatic subject which occupied the very old author? Or that the consciousness of innocence when linked with objective guilt is only the human shield against the cruelty of the irrational—that Oedipus is meaningful in his combination of guilt and innocence as a manifestation of God and of destiny and that his explanation of his conscious innocence is only the poor human inadequate explanation? Everyone will answer this according to his own choice. But, clearly, the theme of *Philoctetes* and the theme of the old Oedipus are connected. /

If an analysis such as this has importance, it is to show the relation of Sophocles to the raw material of his plays—the myth. It is to show the maturing of a theme in Sophocles' mind and his successive treatments of it in the same and different legends. In the Oedipus story it is a certain fundamental situation which becomes significant for Sophocles, and the characters are altered to suit the story. Creon in the first, Oedipus in the second, are examples of the same sort of

dilemma, even though the dilemma of Creon in the *Antigone* is incidental to the main emphasis of the play, which is on Antigone. But the dilemma was to be much more fruitful for Sophocles as a writer and thinker than the plain issue between Antigone and Creon. The dilemma resolves itself in the last play at the end of Sophocles' life into the dramatic statement of a principle, of the union of the blessed and the cursed, of the just and the unjust, and sometimes (not always) of the consciously innocent and the unconsciously guilty. The fact that Sophocles could in two successive treatments of the play fifteen years apart switch the parts of Creon and Oedipus indicates that neither the moral color of the characters nor even their identity was absolutely fixed in his mind. The same conclusion is borne out by the great similarity between the *Philoctetes* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles in his last days was incessantly thinking of the man who is blessed and cursed. For the theater he became once the lame castaway Philoctetes, who yet, in virtue of his archery, is to be the conqueror of Troy; in the next play he is Oedipus, who sinned against the order of human society but is still to be the blessing of Athens and the patron saint of Colonus. It is the theme and not the man that matters. Consequently, it is the kernel of the legend, as he saw it for the moment, that is sacred for Sophocles, not the identification of all the characters in a certain relation to one another. True, he has treated the Oedipus story three times in his life, which means that the Oedipus story had a certain fascination for him—that somehow hidden in it he knew there was what he wanted to say. But he did not have to think of the whole story and the interdependence of its characters when he made his changes each time. One stage of the theme borne by the hero is given to a character in a totally different myth. The sequence is Creon, Oedipus, Philoctetes, Oedipus. It may seem absurd to link Creon, the obvious form of tyrant (as conceived by the Athenians), and Philoctetes. But it is the progression we should notice. The tyrant who with true and good intentions orders what is wrong, morally and religiously, is crudely represented in Creon, he is much more subtly represented in Oedipus himself in the next play. But the similarity of the situation and the nature of the opposition to him proves how generically the

character is conceived. You can switch the labels, and Creon becomes Oedipus. But if the character is generic, the situation is deepening. We are beginning to understand *why* a certain sort of tyrant may be a tyrant and in a shadowy way how conscious and unconscious guilt are related. In the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* the situation is being seen in its last stages. We are no longer concerned with how Philoctetes came to sin or how Oedipus is the author of his own ruin. But only how does it feel to be an object both of disgust and of fear to your fellows, while you yourself are simultaneously aware of the injustice of your treatment and at last, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, of the objective proofs of God's favor.

For Sophocles the myth was the treatment of the generic aspect of human dilemmas. What he made of the myth in his plays was neither history nor the kind of dramatic creation represented by *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Not history, for in no sense is the uniqueness of the event or the uniqueness of the character important; not drama in the Shakespearean sense, because Sophocles' figures do not have, as Shakespeare's do, the timeless and complete reality in themselves. Behind the figure of Oedipus or Creon stands the tyrant of the legend; and behind the tyrant of the legend, the meaning of all despotic authority. Behind the old Oedipus is the beggar and wanderer of the legend, and behind him the mysterious human combination of opposites—opposites in meaning and in fact. And so the character may fluctuate or the names may vary. It is the theme, the generic side of tragedy, which is important; it is there that the emphasis of the play rests.

DAVID GRENE

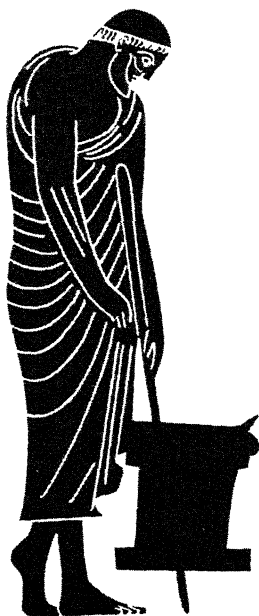
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO





# OEDIPUS THE KING

*Translated by*  
*DAVID GRENE*



## CHARACTERS

*Oedipus, King of Thebes*

*Jocasta, His Wife*

*Creon, His Brother-in-Law*

*Teiresias, an Old Blind Prophet*

*A Priest*

*First Messenger*

*Second Messenger*

*A Herdsman*

*A Chorus of Old Men of Thebes*

## OEDIPUS THE KING

SCENE: *In front of the palace of Oedipus at Thebes. To the right of the stage near the altar stands the Priest with a crowd of children. Oedipus emerges from the central door.*

*Oedipus*

Children, young sons and daughters of old Cadmus,  
why do you sit here with your suppliant crowns?  
The town is heavy with a mingled burden  
of sounds and smells, of groans and hymns and incense;  
I did not think it fit that I should hear  
of this from messengers but came myself,—  
I Oedipus whom all men call the Great.

5

*(He turns to the Priest.)*

You're old and they are young; come, speak for them  
What do you fear or want, that you sit here  
suppliant? Indeed I'm willing to give all  
that you may need; I would be very hard  
should I not pity suppliants like these.

10

*Priest*

O ruler of my country, Oedipus,  
you see our company around the altar,  
you see our ages; some of us, like these,  
who cannot yet fly far, and some of us  
heavy with age; these children are the chosen  
among the young, and I the priest of Zeus.  
Within the market place sit others crowned  
with suppliant garlands, at the double shrine  
of Pallas and the temple where Ismenus  
gives oracles by fire. King, you yourself  
have seen our city reeling like a wreck  
already; it can scarcely lift its prow  
out of the depths, out of the bloody surf.

15

20

A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth, 25  
 A blight is on the cattle in the fields,  
 a blight is on our women that no children  
 are born to them; a God that carries fire,  
 a deadly pestilence, is on our town,  
 strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus  
 is emptied of its people while black Death  
 grows rich in groaning and in lamentation 30  
 We have not come as suppliants to this altar  
 because we thought of you as of a God,  
 but rather judging you the first of men  
 in all the chances of this life and when  
 we mortals have to do with more than man.  
 You came and by your coming saved our city, 35  
 freed us from tribute which we paid of old  
 to the Sphinx, cruel singer This you did  
 in virtue of no knowledge we could give you,  
 in virtue of no teaching; it was God  
 that aided you, men say, and you are held  
 with God's assistance to have saved our lives.  
 Now Oedipus, Greatest in all men's eyes, 40  
 here falling at your feet we all entreat you,  
 find us some strength for rescue.  
 Perhaps you'll hear a wise word from some God,  
 perhaps you will learn something from a man  
 (for I have seen that for the skilled of practice  
 the outcome of their counsels live the most). 45  
 Noblest of men, go, and raise up our city,  
 go,—and give heed. For now this land of ours  
 calls you its savior since you saved it once.  
 So, let us never speak about your reign  
 as of a time when first our feet were set  
 secure on high, but later fell to ruin. 50  
 Raise up our city, save it and raise it up.  
 Once you have brought us luck with happy omen;  
 be no less now in fortune.

If you will rule this land, as now you rule it,  
better to rule it full of men than empty. 55  
For neither tower nor ship is anything  
when empty, and none live in it together.

*Oedipus*

I pity you, children. You have come full of longing,  
but I have known the story before you told it  
only too well. I know you are all sick,  
yet there is not one of you, sick though you are, 60  
that is as sick as I myself.  
Your several sorrows each have single scope  
and touch but one of you. My spirit groans  
for city and myself and you at once.  
You have not roused me like a man from sleep; 65  
know that I have given many tears to this,  
gone many ways wandering in thought,  
but as I thought I found only one remedy  
and that I took. I sent Menoeceus' son  
Creon, Jocasta's brother, to Apollo, 70  
to his Pythian temple,  
that he might learn there by what act or word  
I could save this city. As I count the days,  
it vexes me what ails him; he is gone  
far longer than he needed for the journey. 75  
But when he comes, then, may I prove a villain,  
if I shall not do all the God commands.

*Priest*

Thanks for your gracious words. Your servants here  
signal that Creon is this moment coming.

*Oedipus*

His face is bright. O holy Lord Apollo, 80  
grant that his news too may be bright for us  
and bring us safety.

*Priest*

It is happy news,  
I think, for else his head would not be crowned  
with sprigs of fruitful laurel.

*Oedipus*

We will know soon,  
he's within hail. Lord Creon, my good brother,  
what is the word you bring us from the God?

85

*(Creon enters.)*

*Creon*

A good word,—for things hard to bear themselves  
if in the final issue all is well  
I count complete good fortune.

*Oedipus*

What do you mean?  
What you have said so far  
leaves me uncertain whether to trust or fear.

90

*Creon*

If you will hear my news before these others  
I am ready to speak, or else to go within.

*Oedipus*

Speak it to all;  
the grief I bear, I bear it more for these  
than for my own heart.

*Creon*

I will tell you, then,  
what I heard from the God.  
King Phoebus in plain words commanded us  
to drive out a pollution from our land,  
pollution grown ingrained within the land;  
drive it out, said the God, not cherish it,  
till it's past cure.

95

*Oedipus*

What is the rite  
of purification? How shall it be done?

*Creon*

By banishing a man, or expiation  
of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt  
which holds our city in this destroying storm.

*Oedipus*

Who is this man whose fate the God pronounces?

*Creon*

My Lord, before you piloted the state  
we had a king called Laius.

*Oedipus*

I know of him by hearsay. I have not seen him.

*Creon*

The God commanded clearly: let some one  
punish with force this dead man's murderers.

*Oedipus*

Where are they in the world? Where would a trace  
of this old crime be found? It would be hard  
to guess where.

*Creon*

The clue is in this land;  
that which is sought is found;  
the unheeded thing escapes:  
so said the God.

*Oedipus*

Was it at home,  
or in the country that death came upon him,  
or in another country travelling?

*Creon*

He went, he said himself, upon an embassy,  
but never returned when he set out from home.

*Oedipus*

Was there no messenger, no fellow traveller  
who knew what happened? Such a one might tell  
something of use.



*Creon*

They were all killed save one. He fled in terror  
and he could tell us nothing in clear terms  
of what he knew, nothing, but one thing only.

*Oedipus*

What was it?

120

If we could even find a slum beginning  
in which to hope, we might discover much.

*Creon*

This man said that the robbers they encountered  
were many and the hands that did the murder  
were many; it was no man's single power.

*Oedipus*

How could a robber dare a deed like this  
were he not helped with money from the city,  
money and treachery?

125

*Creon*

That indeed was thought.

But Laius was dead and in our trouble  
there was none to help.

*Oedipus*

What trouble was so great to hinder you  
inquiring out the murder of your king?

*Creon*

The riddling Sphinx induced us to neglect  
mysterious crimes and rather seek solution  
of troubles at our feet.

130

*Oedipus*

I will bring this to light again. King Phoebus  
fittingly took this care about the dead,  
and you too fittingly.

And justly you will see in me an ally,  
a champion of my country and the God.  
For when I drive pollution from the land

135

I will not serve a distant friend's advantage,  
but act in my own interest. Whoever  
he was that killed the king may readily  
wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand;  
so helping the dead king I help myself.

Come, children, take your suppliant boughs and go;  
up from the altars now. Call the assembly  
and let it meet upon the understanding  
that I'll do everything. God will decide  
whether we prosper or remain in sorrow.

*Priest*

Rise, children—it was this we came to seek,  
which of himself the king now offers us  
May Phoebus who gave us the oracle  
come to our rescue and stay the plague

*(Exeunt all but the Chorus.)*

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

What is the sweet spoken word of God from the shrine of Pytho  
rich in gold  
that has come to glorious Thebes?  
I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling  
hold  
my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of fears  
for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the  
revolving years.  
Speak to me, immortal voice,  
child of golden Hope.

*Antistrophe*

First I call on you, Athene, deathless daughter of Zeus,  
and Artemis, Earth Upholder,  
who sits in the midst of the market place in the throne which  
men call Fame,  
and Phoebus, the Far Shooter, three averters of Fate,

come to us now, if ever before, when ruin rushed upon the state, 165  
you drove destruction's flame away  
out of our land.

*Strophe*

Our sorrows defy number;  
all the ship's timbers are rotten;  
taking of thought is no spear for the driving away of the plague. 170  
There are no growing children in this famous land;  
there are no women bearing the pangs of childbirth.  
You may see them one with another, like birds swift on the  
wing, 175  
quicker than fire unmastered,  
speeding away to the coast of the Western God.

*Antistrophe*

In the unnumbered deaths  
of its people the city dies;  
those children that are born lie dead on the naked earth  
unpitied, spreading contagion of death; and grey haired mothers  
and wives  
everywhere stand at the altar's edge, suppliant, moaning; 182-85  
the hymn to the healing God rings out but with it the wailing  
voices are blended.  
From these our sufferings grant us, O golden Daughter of Zeus,  
glad-faced deliverance.

*Strophe*

There is no clash of brazen shields but our fight is with the War  
God,  
a War God ringed with the cries of men, a savage God who burns 191  
us;  
grant that he turn in racing course backwards out of our coun-  
try's bounds  
to the great palace of Amphitrite or where the waves of the 195  
Thracian sea  
deny the stranger safe anchorage.  
Whatsoever escapes the night

at last the light of day revisits;  
so smite the War God, Father Zeus,  
beneath your thunderbolt,  
for you are the Lord of the lightning, the lightning that  
carries fire

*Antistrophe*

And your unconquered arrow shafts, winged by the golden  
corded bow,  
Lycean King, I beg to be at our side for help;  
and the gleaming torches of Artemis with which she scours the  
Lycean hills,  
and I call on the God with the turban of gold, who gave his name  
to this country of ours,  
the Bacchic God with the wind flushed face,  
Evian One, who travel  
with the Maenad company,  
combat the God that burns us  
with your torch of pine,  
for the God that is our enemy is a God unhonoured among the  
Gods.

*(Oedipus returns.)*

*Oedipus*

For what you ask me—if you will hear my words,  
and hearing welcome them and fight the plague,  
you will find strength and lightening of your load.

Hark to me; what I say to you, I say  
as one that is a stranger to the story  
as stranger to the deed. For I would not  
be far upon the track if I alone  
were tracing it without a clue. But now,  
since after all was finished, I became  
a citizen among you, citizens—  
now I proclaim to all the men of Thebes:  
who so among you knows the murderer  
by whose hand Laius, son of Labdacus,

died—I command him to tell everything  
to me,—yes, though he fears himself to take the blame  
on his own head, for bitter punishment  
he shall have none, but leave this land unharmed.

Or if he knows the murderer, another, 230  
a foreigner, still let him speak the truth.

For I will pay him and be grateful, too  
But if you shall keep silence, if perhaps  
some one of you, to shield a guilty friend,  
or for his own sake shall reject my words—  
hear what I shall do then: 235

I forbid that man, whoever he be, my land,  
my land where I hold sovereignty and throne;  
and I forbid any to welcome him  
or cry him greeting or make him a sharer 240  
in sacrifice or offering to the Gods,  
or give him water for his hands to wash.

I command all to drive him from their homes,  
since he is our pollution, as the oracle  
of Pytho's God proclaimed him now to me.  
So I stand forth a champion of the God  
and of the man who died. 245

Upon the murderer I invoke this curse—  
whether he is one man and all unknown,  
or one of many—may he wear out his life  
in misery to miserable doom!  
If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth 250  
I pray that I myself may feel my curse.

On you I lay my charge to fulfill all this  
for me, for the God, and for this land of ours  
destroyed and blighted, by the God forsaken.

Even were this no matter of God's ordinance 255  
it would not fit you so to leave it lie,  
unpurified, since a good man is dead  
and one that was a king. Search it out.

Since I am now the holder of his office,  
and have his bed and wife that once was his,  
and had his line not been unfortunate  
we would have common children—(fortune leaped  
upon his head)—because of all these things,  
I fight in his defence as for my father,  
and I shall try all means to take the murderer  
of Laius the son of Labdacus  
the son of Polydorus and before him  
of Cadmus and before him of Agenor.  
Those who do not obey me, may the Gods  
grant no crops springing from the ground they plough  
nor children to their women! May a fate  
like this, or one still worse than this consume them!  
For you whom these words please, the other Thebans,  
may Justice as your ally and all the Gods  
live with you, blessing you now and for ever!

*Chorus*

As you have held me to my oath, I speak:  
I neither killed the king nor can declare  
the killer; but since Phoebus set the quest  
it is his part to tell who the man is.

*Oedipus*

Right; but to put compulsion on the Gods  
against their will—no man can do that.

*Chorus*

May I then say what I think second best?

*Oedipus*

If there's a third best, too, spare not to tell it.

*Chorus*

I know that what the Lord Teiresias  
sees, is most often what the Lord Apollo  
sees. If you should inquire of this from him  
you might find out most clearly.

*Oedipus*

Even in this my actions have not been sluggard.  
On Creon's word I have sent two messengers  
and why the prophet is not here already  
I have been wondering.

*Chorus*

His skill apart  
there is besides only an old faint story.

290

*Oedipus*

What is it?  
I look at every story.

*Chorus*

It was said  
that he was killed by certain wayfarers.

*Oedipus*

I heard that, too, but no one saw the killer.

*Chorus*

Yet if he has a share of fear at all,  
his courage will not stand firm, hearing your curse.

295

*Oedipus*

The man who in the doing did not shrink  
will fear no word.

*Chorus*

Here comes his prosecutor:  
led by your men the godly prophet comes  
in whom alone of mankind truth is native.

*(Enter Teiresias, led by a little boy.)*

*Oedipus*

Teiresias, you are versed in everything,  
things teachable and things not to be spoken,  
things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.  
You have no eyes but in your mind you know  
with what a plague our city is afflicted.  
My lord, in you alone we find a champion,

300

in you alone one that can rescue us.  
Perhaps you have not heard the messengers,  
but Phoebus sent in answer to our sending  
an oracle declaring that our freedom  
from this disease would only come when we  
should learn the names of those who killed King Laius,  
and kill them or expel from our country.  
Do not begrudge us oracles from birds,  
or any other way of prophecy  
within your skill; save yourself and the city,  
save me; redeem the debt of our pollution  
that lies on us because of this dead man.  
We are in your hands; pains are most nobly taken  
to help another when you have means and power.

*Teiresias*

'Alas, how terrible is wisdom when  
it brings no profit to the man that's wise!  
This I knew well, but had forgotten it,  
else I would not have come here.

*Oedipus*

What is this?

How sad you are now you have come!

*Teiresias*

Let me

go home. It will be easiest for us both  
to bear our several destinies to the end  
if you will follow my advice.

*Oedipus*

You'd rob us

of this your gift of prophecy? You talk  
as one who had no care for law nor love  
for Thebes who reared you.

*Teiresias*

Yes, but I see that even your own words  
miss the mark; therefore I must fear for mine.



*Oedipus*

For God's sake if you know of anything,  
do not turn from us; all of us kneel to you,  
all of us here, your suppliants.

*Teiresias*

All of you here know nothing. I will not  
bring to the light of day my troubles, mine—  
rather than call them yours.

*Oedipus*

What do you mean?

You know of something but refuse to speak  
Would you betray us and destroy the city?

330

*Teiresias*

I will not bring this pain upon us both,  
neither on you nor on myself. Why is it  
you question me and waste your labour? I  
will tell you nothing.

*Oedipus*

You would provoke a stone! Tell us, you villain,  
tell us, and do not stand there quietly  
unmoved and balking at the issue.

335

*Teiresias*

You blame my temper but you do not see  
your own that lives within you; it is me  
you chide.

*Oedipus*

Who would not feel his temper rise  
at words like these with which you shame our city?

340

*Teiresias*

Of themselves things will come, although I hide them  
and breathe no word of them.

*Oedipus*

Since they will come  
tell them to me.

*Teiresias*

I will say nothing further.

Against this answer let your temper rage  
as wildly as you will.

*Oedipus*

Indeed I am

so angry I shall not hold back a jot  
of what I think. For I would have you know  
I think you were complotter of the deed  
and doer of the deed save in so far  
as for the actual killing. Had you had eyes  
I would have said alone you murdered him.

*Teiresias*

Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep  
the letter of your proclamation and  
from this day forth to speak no word of greeting  
to these nor me; you are the land's pollution.

*Oedipus*

How shamelessly you started up this taunt!  
How do you think you will escape?

*Teiresias*

I have.

I have escaped; the truth is what I cherish  
and that's my strength.

*Oedipus*

And who has taught you truth?

Not your profession surely!

*Teiresias*

You have taught me,  
for you have made me speak against my will.

*Oedipus*

Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn it better.

*Teiresias*

Did you not understand before or would you  
provoke me into speaking?

*Oedipus*

I did not grasp it,  
not so to call it known. Say it again.

*Teiresias*

I say you are the murderer of the king  
whose murderer you seek.

*Oedipus*

Not twice you shall  
say calumnies like this and stay unpunished.

*Teiresias*

Shall I say more to tempt your anger more?

*Oedipus*

As much as you desire; it will be said  
in vain.

365

*Teiresias*

I say that with those you love best  
you live in foulest shame unconsciously  
and do not see where you are in calamity.

*Oedipus*

Do you imagine you can always talk  
like this, and live to laugh at it hereafter?

*Teiresias*

Yes, if the truth has anything of strength.

*Oedipus*

It has, but not for you; it has no strength  
for you because you are blind in mind and ears  
as well as in your eyes.

370

*Teiresias*

You are a poor wretch  
to taunt me with the very insults which  
every one soon will heap upon yourself.

*Oedipus*

Your life is one long night so that you cannot  
hurt me or any other who sees the light.

375

*Teiresias*

It is not fate that I should be your ruin,  
Apollo is enough; it is his care  
to work this out.

*Oedipus*

Was this your own design  
or Creon's?

*Teiresias*

Creon is no hurt to you,  
but you are to yourself.

*Oedipus*

Wealth, sovereignty and skill outmatching skill  
for the contrivance of an envied life!  
Great store of jealousy fill your treasury chests,  
if my friend Creon, friend from the first and loyal,  
thus secretly attacks me, secretly  
desires to drive me out and secretly  
suborns this juggling, trick devising quack,  
this wily beggar who has only eyes  
for his own gains, but blindness in his skill.  
For, tell me, where have you seen clear, Teiresias,  
with your prophetic eyes? When the dark singer,  
the sphinx, was in your country, did you speak  
word of deliverance to its citizens?  
And yet the riddle's answer was not the province  
of a chance comer. It was a prophet's task  
and plainly you had no such gift of prophecy  
from birds nor otherwise from any God  
to glean a word of knowledge. But I came,  
Oedipus, who knew nothing, and I stopped her.  
I solved the riddle by my wit alone.  
Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now  
you would expel me,  
because you think that you will find a place  
by Creon's throne. I think you will be sorry,

both you and your accomplice, for your plot  
to drive me out. And did I not regard you  
as an old man, some suffering would have taught you  
that what was in your heart was treason

*Chorus*

We look at this man's words and yours, my king,  
and we find both have spoken them in anger. 405  
We need no angry words but only thought  
how we may best hit the God's meaning for us

*Teiresias*

If you are king, at least I have the right  
no less to speak in my defence against you.  
Of that much I am master. I am no slave 410  
of yours, but Loxias', and so I shall not  
enroll myself with Creon for my patron.  
Since you have taunted me with being blind,  
here is my word for you.  
You have your eyes but see not where you are  
in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.  
Do you know who your parents are? Unknowing 415  
you are an enemy to kith and kin  
in death, beneath the earth, and in this life.  
A deadly footed, double striking curse,  
from father and mother both, shall drive you forth  
out of this land, with darkness on your eyes,  
that now have such straight vision. Shall there be  
a place will not be harbour to your cries, 420  
a corner of Cithaeron will not ring  
in echo to your cries, soon, soon,—  
when you shall learn the secret of your marriage,  
which steered you to a haven in this house,—  
haven no haven, after lucky voyage?  
And of the multitude of other evils  
establishing a grim equality  
between you and your children, you know nothing. 425

So, muddy with contempt my words and Creon's!  
Misery shall grind no man as it will you

*Oedipus*

Is it endurable that I should hear  
such words from him? Go and a curse go with you!  
Quick, home with you! Out of my house at once!

*Teiresias*

I would not have come either had you not called me.

*Oedipus*

I did not know then you would talk like a fool—  
or it would have been long before I called you.

*Teiresias*

I am a fool then, as it seems to you—  
but to the parents who have bred you, wise.

*Oedipus*

What parents? Stop! Who are they of all the world?

*Teiresias*

This day will show your birth and will destroy you.

*Oedipus*

How needlessly your riddles darken everything

*Teiresias*

But it's in riddle answering you are strongest.

*Oedipus*

Yes. Taunt me where you will find me great.

*Teiresias*

It is this very luck that has destroyed you.

*Oedipus*

I do not care, if it has saved this city.

*Teiresias*

Well, I will go. Come, boy, lead me away.

*Oedipus*

Yes, lead him off So long as you are here,

you'll be a stumbling block and a vexation;  
once gone, you will not trouble me again.

*Teiresias*

I have said  
what I came here to say not fearing your  
countenance. there is no way you can hurt me.  
I tell you, king, this man, this murderer  
(whom you have long declared you are in search of,  
indicting him in threatening proclamation  
as murderer of Laius)—he is here. 450  
In name he is a stranger among citizens  
but soon he will be shown to be a citizen  
true native Theban, and he'll have no joy  
of the discovery: blindness for sight  
and beggary for riches his exchange, 455  
he shall go journeying to a foreign country  
tapping his way before him with a stick  
He shall be proved father and brother both  
to his own children in his house; to her  
that gave him birth, a son and husband both;  
a fellow sower in his father's bed  
with that same father that he murdered.  
Go within, reckon that out, and if you find me 460  
mistaken, say I have no skill in prophecy.

*(Exeunt separately Teiresias and Oedipus.)*

*Chorus*

*Strophe*  
Who is the man proclaimed  
by Delphi's prophetic rock  
as the bloody handed murderer,  
the doer of deeds that none dare name? 465  
Now is the time for him to run  
with a stronger foot  
than Pegasus  
for the child of Zeus leaps in arms upon him 470  
with fire and the lightning bolt,

and terribly close on his heels  
are the Fates that never miss.

*Antistrophe*

Lately from snowy Parnassus  
clearly the voice flashed forth,  
bidding each Theban track him down,  
the unknown murderer.  
In the savage forests he lurks and in  
the caverns like  
the mountain bull.  
He is sad and lonely, and lonely his feet  
that carry him far from the navel of earth;  
but its prophecies, ever living,  
flutter around his head.

*Strophe*

The augur has spread confusion,  
terrible confusion;  
I do not approve what was said  
nor can I deny it.  
I do not know what to say;  
I am in a flutter of foreboding;  
I never heard in the present  
nor past of a quarrel between  
the sons of Labdacus and Polybus,  
that I might bring as proof  
in attacking the popular fame  
of Oedipus, seeking  
to take vengeance for undiscovered  
death in the line of Labdacus.

*Antistrophe*

Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise  
and in human things all knowing;  
but amongst men there is no  
distinct judgment, between the prophet  
and me—which of us is right.



One man may pass another in wisdom  
but I would never agree  
with those that find fault with the king  
till I should see the word  
proved right beyond doubt. For once  
in visible form the Sphinx  
came on him and all of us  
saw his wisdom and in that test  
he saved the city. So he will not be condemned by my mind. 512

(Enter Creon.)

*Creon*

Citizens, I have come because I heard  
deadly words spread about me, that the king  
accuses me I cannot take that from him  
If he believes that in these present troubles 515  
he has been wronged by me in word or deed  
I do not want to live on with the burden  
of such a scandal on me. The report 520  
injures me doubly and most vitally—  
for I'll be called a traitor to my city  
and traitor also to my friends and you.

*Chorus*

Perhaps it was a sudden gust of anger  
that forced that insult from him, and no judgment.

*Creon*

But did he say that it was in compliance 525  
with schemes of mine that the seer told him lies?

*Chorus*

Yes, he said that, but why, I do not know.

*Creon*

Were his eyes straight in his head? Was his mind right  
when he accused me in this fashion?

*Chorus*

I do not know; I have no eyes to see 530  
what princes do. Here comes the king himself.

(Enter Oedipus )

*Oedipus*

You, sir, how is it you come here? Have you so much brazen-faced daring that you venture in my house although you are proved manifestly the murderer of that man, and though you tried, openly, highway robbery of my crown? For God's sake, tell me what you saw in me, what cowardice or what stupidity, that made you lay a plot like this against me? Did you imagine I should not observe the crafty scheme that stole upon me or seeing it, take no means to counter it? Was it not stupid of you to make the attempt, to try to hunt down royal power without the people at your back or friends? For only with the people at your back or money can the hunt end in the capture of a crown

*Creon*

Do you know what you're doing? Will you listen to words to answer yours, and then pass judgment?

*Oedipus*

You're quick to speak, but I am slow to grasp you, for I have found you dangerous,—and my foe.

*Creon*

First of all hear what I shall say to that.

*Oedipus*

At least don't tell me that you are not guilty.

*Creon*

If you think obstinacy without wisdom a valuable possession, you are wrong.

*Oedipus*

And you are wrong if you believe that one, a criminal, will not be punished only because he is my kinsman.

*Creon*

This is but just—  
but tell me, then, of what offense I'm guilty?

*Oedipus*

Did you or did you not urge me to send  
to this prophetic mumblér? 555

*Creon*

I did indeed,  
and I shall stand by what I told you.

*Oedipus*

How long ago is it since Laius. . . .

*Creon*

What about Laius? I don't understand.

*Oedipus*

Vanished—died—was murdered? 560

*Creon*

It is long,  
a long, long time to reckon.

*Oedipus*

Was this prophet  
in the profession then?

*Creon*

He was, and honoured  
as highly as he is today.

*Oedipus*

At that time did he say a word about me?

*Creon*

Never, at least when I was near him. 565

*Oedipus*

You never made a search for the dead man?

*Creon*

We searched, indeed, but never learned of anything.

*Oedipus*

Why did our wise old friend not say this then?

*Creon*

I don't know; and when I know nothing, I  
usually hold my tongue.

*Oedipus*

You know this much,  
and can declare this much if you are loyal.

*Creon*

What is it? If I know, I'll not deny it.

*Oedipus*

That he would not have said that I killed Laius  
had he not met you first.

*Creon*

You know yourself  
whether he said this, but I demand that I  
should hear as much from you as you from me.

*Oedipus*

Then hear,—I'll not be proved a murderer.

*Creon*

Well, then. You're married to my sister.

*Oedipus*

Yes,  
that I am not disposed to deny.

*Creon*

You rule  
this country giving her an equal share  
in the government?

*Oedipus*

Yes, everything she wants  
she has from me.

*Creon*

And I, as thirdsman to you,  
am rated as the equal of you two?

*Oedipus*

Yes, and it's there you've proved yourself false friend.

*Creon*

Not if you will reflect on it as I do.  
 Consider, first, if you think any one  
 would choose to rule and fear rather than rule 585  
 and sleep untroubled by a fear if power  
 were equal in both cases I, at least,  
 I was not born with such a frantic yearning  
 to be a king—but to do what kings do.  
 And so it is with every one who has learned  
 wisdom and self-control. As it stands now,  
 the prizes are all mine—and without fear. 590  
 But if I were the king myself, I must  
 do much that went against the grain.  
 How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me  
 than painless power and an assured authority?  
 I am not so besotted yet that I  
 want other honours than those that come with profit. 595  
 Now every man's my pleasure; every man greets me;  
 now those who are your suitors fawn on me,—  
 success for them depends upon my favour  
 Why should I let all this go to win that?  
 My mind would not be traitor if it's wise; 600  
 I am no treason lover, of my nature,  
 nor would I ever dare to join a plot.  
 Prove what I say. Go to the oracle  
 at Pytho and inquire about the answers,  
 if they are as I told you. For the rest, 605  
 if you discover I laid any plot  
 together with the seer, kill me, I say,  
 not only by your vote but by my own.  
 But do not charge me on obscure opinion  
 without some proof to back it. It's not just  
 lightly to count your knaves as honest men, 610  
 nor honest men as knaves. To throw away  
 an honest friend is, as it were, to throw  
 your life away, which a man loves the best.

In time you will know all with certainty,  
time is the only test of honest men,  
one day is space enough to know a rogue.

*Chorus*

His words are wise, king, if one fears to fall.  
Those who are quick of temper are not safe.

*Oedipus*

When he that plots against me secretly  
moves quickly, I must quickly counterplot.  
If I wait taking no decisive measure  
his business will be done, and mine be spoiled.

*Creon*

What do you want to do then? Banish me?

*Oedipus*

No, certainly; kill you, not banish you.<sup>1</sup>

*Creon*

I do not think that you've your wits about you.

*Oedipus*

For my own interests, yes.

*Creon*

But for mine, too,  
you should think equally.

*Oedipus*

You are a rogue.

*Creon*

Suppose you do not understand?

*Oedipus*

But yet  
I must be ruler.

1. Two lines omitted here owing to the confusion in the dialogue consequent on the loss of a third line. The lines as they stand in Jebb's edition (1902) are:

*Oed.* That you may show what manner of thing is envy.

*Creon.* You speak as one that will not yield or trust

[*Oed.* lost line]

*Creon*

Not if you rule badly.

*Oedipus*

O, city, city!

*Creon*

I too have some share  
in the city; it is not yours alone.

630

*Chorus*

Stop, my lords! Here—and in the nick of time  
I see Jocasta coming from the house;  
with her help lay the quarrel that now stirs you.

(*Enter Jocasta.*)

*Jocasta*

For shame! Why have you raised this foolish squabbling  
brawl? Are you not ashamed to air your private  
griefs when the country's sick? Go in, you, Oedipus,  
and you, too, Creon, into the house. Don't magnify  
your nothing troubles.

635

*Creon*

Sister, Oedipus,  
your husband, thinks he has the right to do  
terrible wrongs—he has but to choose between  
two terrors: banishing or killing me.

640

*Oedipus*

He's right, Jocasta; for I find him plotting  
with knavish tricks against my person.

*Creon*

That God may never bless me! May I die  
accursed, if I have been guilty of  
one tittle of the charge you bring against me!

645

*Jocasta*

I beg you, Oedipus, trust him in this,  
spare him for the sake of this his oath to God,  
for my sake, and the sake of those who stand here.

*Chorus*

Be gracious, be merciful,  
we beg of you.

*Oedipus*

In what would you have me yield?

*Chorus*

He has been no silly child in the past.  
He is strong in his oath now.  
Spare him.

*Oedipus*

Do you know what you ask?

*Chorus*

Yes.

*Oedipus*

Tell me then.

*Chorus*

He has been your friend before all men's eyes; do not cast him  
away dishonoured on an obscure conjecture.

*Oedipus*

I would have you know that this request of yours  
really requests my death or banishment.

*Chorus*

May the Sun God, king of Gods, forbid! May I die without God's  
blessing, without friends' help, if I had any such thought. But my  
spirit is broken by my unhappiness for my wasting country; and  
this would but add troubles amongst ourselves to the other  
troubles.

*Oedipus*

Well, let him go then—if I must die ten times for it,  
or be sent out dishonoured into exile.  
It is your lips that prayed for him I pitied,  
not his; wherever he is, I shall hate him.



*Creon*

I see you sulk in yielding and you're dangerous  
when you are out of temper; natures like yours  
are justly heaviest for themselves to bear.

675

*Oedipus*

Leave me alone! Take yourself off, I tell you.

*Creon*

I'll go, you have not known me, but they have,  
and they have known my innocence.

(*Exit.*)

*Chorus*

Won't you take him inside, lady?

*Jocasta*

Yes, when I've found out what was the matter.

680

*Chorus*

There was some misconceived suspicion of a story, and on the  
other side the sting of injustice.

*Jocasta*

So, on both sides?

*Chorus*

Yes.

*Jocasta*

What was the story?

*Chorus*

I think it best, in the interests of the country, to leave it where  
it ended.

685

*Oedipus*

You see where you have ended, straight of judgment  
although you are, by softening my anger.

*Chorus*

Sir, I have said before and I say again—be sure that I would have  
been proved a madman, bankrupt in sane council, if I should put  
you away, you who steered the country I love safely when she

689

was crazed with troubles. God grant that now, too, you may prove a fortunate guide for us.

*Jocasta*

Tell me, my lord, I beg of you, what was it that roused your anger so?

*Oedipus*

Yes, I will tell you.  
I honour you more than I honour them  
It was Creon and the plots he laid against me.

*Jocasta*

Tell me—if you can clearly tell the quarrel—

*Oedipus*

Creon says  
that I'm the murderer of Laius

*Jocasta*

Of his own knowledge or on information?

*Oedipus*

He sent this rascal prophet to me, since  
he keeps his own mouth clean of any guilt.

*Jocasta*

Do not concern yourself about this matter,  
listen to me and learn that human beings  
have no part in the craft of prophecy.  
Of that I'll show you a short proof.  
There was an oracle once that came to Laius,—  
I will not say that it was Phoebus' own,  
but it was from his servants—and it told him  
that it was fate that he should die a victim  
at the hands of his own son, a son to be born  
of Laius and me. But, see now, he,  
the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers  
at a place where three roads meet—so goes the story;  
and for the son—before three days were out  
after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles

and by the hands of others cast him forth  
 upon a pathless hillside. So Apollo 720  
 failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,  
 that he should kill his father, and to Laius  
 also proved false in that the thing he feared,  
 death at his son's hands, never came to pass.  
 So clear in this case were the oracles,  
 so clear and false. Give them no heed, I say,  
 what God discovers need of, easily  
 he shows to us himself. 725

*Oedipus*

O dear Jocasta,  
 as I hear this from you, there comes upon me  
 a wandering of the soul—I could run mad.

*Jocasta*

What trouble is it, that you turn again  
 and speak like this?

*Oedipus*

I thought I heard you say  
 that Laius was killed at a crossroads 730

*Jocasta*

Yes, that was how the story went and still  
 that word goes round.

*Oedipus*

Where is this place, Jocasta,  
 where he was murdered?

*Jocasta*

Phocis is the country  
 and the road splits there, one of two roads from Delphi,  
 another comes from Daulia.

*Oedipus*

How long ago is this? 735

*Jocasta*

The news came to the city just before

you became king and all men's eyes looked to you.  
What is it, Oedipus, that's in your mind?

*Oedipus*

What have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?

*Jocasta*

What is the thought that troubles your heart?

*Oedipus*

Don't ask me yet—tell me of Laius—  
How did he look? How old or young was he?

*Jocasta*

He was a tall man and his hair was grizzled  
already—nearly white—and in his form  
not unlike you.

*Oedipus*

O God, I think I have  
called curses on myself in ignorance.

*Jocasta*

What do you mean? I am terrified  
when I look at you.

*Oedipus*

I have a deadly fear  
that the old seer had eyes. You'll show me more  
if you can tell me one more thing.

*Jocasta*

I will.  
I'm frightened,—but if I can understand,  
I'll tell you all you ask.

*Oedipus*

How was his company?  
Had he few with him when he went this journey,  
or many servants, as would suit a prince?

*Jocasta*

In all there were but five, and among them  
a herald; and one carriage for the king.

*Oedipus*

It's plain—its plain—who was it told you this?

755

*Jocasta*

The only servant that escaped safe home.

*Oedipus*

Is he at home now?

*Jocasta*

No, when he came home again

and saw you king and Laius was dead,  
he came to me and touched my hand and begged  
that I should send him to the fields to be  
my shepherd and so he might see the city  
as far off as he might. So I  
sent him away. He was an honest man,  
as slaves go, and was worthy of far more  
than what he asked of me.

760

*Oedipus*

O, how I wish that he could come back quickly!

765

*Jocasta*

He can. Why is your heart so set on this?

*Oedipus*

O dear Jocasta, I am full of fears  
that I have spoken far too much; and therefore  
I wish to see this shepherd.

*Jocasta*

He will come;

but, Oedipus, I think I'm worthy too  
to know what it is that disquiets you.

770

*Oedipus*

It shall not be kept from you, since my mind  
has gone so far with its forebodings. Whom  
should I confide in rather than you, who is there  
of more importance to me who have passed  
through such a fortune?

Polybus was my father, king of Corinth,  
and Merope, the Dorian, my mother.  
I was held greatest of the citizens  
in Corinth till a curious chance befell me  
as I shall tell you—curious, indeed,  
but hardly worth the store I set upon it.  
There was a dinner and at it a man,  
a drunken man, accused me in his drink  
of being bastard. I was furious  
but held my temper under for that day.  
Next day I went and taxed my parents with it;  
they took the insult very ill from him,  
the drunken fellow who had uttered it.  
So I was comforted for their part, but  
still this thing rankled always, for the story  
crept about widely. And I went at last  
to Pytho, though my parents did not know.  
But Phoebus sent me home again unhonoured  
in what I came to learn, but he foretold  
other and desperate horrors to befall me,  
that I was fated to lie with my mother,  
and show to daylight an accursed breed  
which men would not endure, and I was doomed  
to be murderer of the father that begot me.  
When I heard this I fled, and in the days  
that followed I would measure from the stars  
the whereabouts of Corinth—yes, I fled  
to somewhere where I should not see fulfilled  
the infamies told in that dreadful oracle.  
And as I journeyed I came to the place  
where, as you say, this king met with his death.  
Jocasta, I will tell you the whole truth.  
When I was near the branching of the crossroads,  
going on foot, I was encountered by  
a herald and a carriage with a man in it,  
just as you tell me. He that led the way

and the old man himself wanted to thrust me  
 out of the road by force. I became angry 805  
 and struck the coachman who was pushing me.  
 When the old man saw this he watched his moment,  
 and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,  
 full on the head with his two pointed goad.  
 But he was paid in full and presently 810  
 my stick had struck him backwards from the car  
 and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them  
 all. If it happened there was any tie  
 of kinship twixt this man and Laius,  
 who is then now more miserable than I, 815  
 what man on earth so hated by the Gods,  
 since neither citizen nor foreigner  
 may welcome me at home or even greet me,  
 but drive me out of doors? And it is I,  
 I and no other have so cursed myself. 820  
 And I pollute the bed of him I killed  
 by the hands that killed him. Was I not born evil?  
 Am I not utterly unclean? I had to fly  
 and in my banishment not even see  
 my kindred nor set foot in my own country,  
 or otherwise my fate was to be yoked 825  
 in marriage with my mother and kill my father,  
 Polybus who begot me and had reared me.  
 Would not one rightly judge and say that on me  
 these things were sent by some malignant God?  
 O no, no, no—O holy majesty 830  
 of God on high, may I not see that day!  
 May I be gone out of men's sight before  
 I see the deadly taint of this disaster  
 come upon me.

*Chorus*

Sir, we too fear these things. But until you see this man face to  
 face and hear his story, hope. 835

*Oedipus*

Yes, I have just this much of hope—to wait until the herdsman comes.

*Jocasta*

And when he comes, what do you want with him?

*Oedipus*

I'll tell you; if I find that his story is the same as yours, I at least will be clear of this guilt.

*Jocasta*

Why what so particularly did you learn from my story?

*Oedipus*

You said that he spoke of highway *robbers* who killed Laius. Now if he uses the same number, it was not I who killed him. One man cannot be the same as many. But if he speaks of a man travelling alone, then clearly the burden of the guilt inclines towards me.

*Jocasta*

Be sure, at least, that this was how he told the story. He cannot unsay it now, for every one in the city heard it—not I alone. But, Oedipus, even if he diverges from what he said then, he shall never prove that the murder of Laius squares rightly with the prophecy—for Loxias declared that the king should be killed by his own son. And that poor creature did not kill him surely,—for he died himself first. So as far as prophecy goes, henceforward I shall not look to the right hand or the left.

*Oedipus*

Right. But yet, send some one for the peasant to bring him here; do not neglect it.

*Jocasta*

I will send quickly. Now let me go indoors. I will do nothing except what pleases you.

(*Exeunt.*)

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

May destiny ever find me



pious in word and deed 865  
 prescribed by the laws that live on high:  
 laws begotten in the clear air of heaven,  
 whose only father is Olympus;  
 no mortal nature brought them to birth,  
 no forgetfulness shall lull them to sleep; 870  
 for God is great in them and grows not old.

*Antistrophe*

Insolence breeds the tyrant, insolence  
 if it is glutted with a surfeit, unseasonable, unprofitable, 875  
 climbs to the roof-top and plunges  
 sheer down to the ruin that must be,  
 and there its feet are no service.  
 But I pray that the God may never 880  
 abolish the eager ambition that profits the state.  
 For I shall never cease to hold the God as our protector.

*Strophe*

If a man walks with haughtiness  
 of hand or word and gives no heed 885  
 to Justice and the shrines of Gods  
 despises—may an evil doom  
 smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!—  
 if he reaps gains without justice  
 and will not hold from impiety 890  
 and his fingers itch for untouchable things.  
 When such things are done, what man shall contrive  
 to shield his soul from the shafts of the God?  
 When such deeds are held in honour, 895  
 why should I honour the Gods in the dance?

*Antistrophe*

No longer to the holy place,  
 to the navel of earth I'll go  
 to worship, nor to Abae  
 nor to Olympia, 900  
 unless the oracles are proved to fit,  
 for all men's hands to point at.

O Zeus, if you are rightly called  
the sovereign lord, all-mastering,  
let this not escape you nor your ever-living power!  
The oracles concerning Laius  
are old and dim and men regard them not.  
Apollo is nowhere clear in honour; God's service perishes.

(*Enter Jocasta, carrying garlands.*)

*Jocasta*

Princes of the land, I have had the thought to go  
to the Gods' temples, bringing in my hand  
garlands and gifts of incense, as you see.  
For Oedipus excites himself too much  
at every sort of trouble, not conjecturing,  
like a man of sense, what will be from what was,  
but he is always at the speaker's mercy,  
when he speaks terrors. I can do no good  
by my advice, and so I came as suppliant  
to you, Lycaean Apollo, who are nearest.  
These are the symbols of my prayer and this  
my prayer: grant us escape free of the curse.  
Now when we look to him we are all afraid;  
he's pilot of our ship and he is frightened.

(*Enter Messenger.*)

*Messenger*

Might I learn from you, sirs, where is the house of Oedipus? Or  
best of all, if you know, where is the king himself?

*Chorus*

This is his house and he is within doors. This lady is his wife and  
mother of his children.

*Messenger*

God bless you, lady, and God bless your household! God bless  
Oedipus' noble wife!

*Jocasta*

God bless you, sir, for your kind greeting! What do you want  
of us that you have come here? What have you to tell us?

*Messenger*

Good news, lady. Good for your house and for your husband.

*Jocasta*

What is your news? Who sent you to us?

935

*Messenger*

I come from Corinth and the news I bring will give you pleasure.  
Perhaps a little pain too.

*Jocasta*

What is this news of double meaning?

*Messenger*

The people of the Isthmus will choose Oedipus to be their king.  
That is the rumour there.

940

*Jocasta*

But isn't their king still old Polybus?

*Messenger*

No. He is in his grave. Death has got him.

*Jocasta*

Is that the truth? Is Oedipus' father dead?

*Messenger*

May I die myself if it be otherwise!

*Jocasta (to a servant)*

Be quick and run to the King with the news! O oracles of the  
Gods, where are you now? It was from this man Oedipus fled, lest  
he should be his murderer! And now he is dead, in the course of  
nature, and not killed by Oedipus.

945

(*Enter Oedipus.*)

*Oedipus*

Dearest Jocasta, why have you sent for me?

950

*Jocasta*

Listen to this man and when you hear reflect what is the outcome  
of the holy oracles of the Gods.

*Oedipus*

Who is he? What is his message for me?

*Jocasta*

He is from Corinth and he tells us that your father Polybus is dead and gone.

*Oedipus*

What's this you say, sir? Tell me yourself.

*Messenger*

Since this is the first matter you want clearly told: Polybus has gone down to death. You may be sure of it.

*Oedipus*

By treachery or sickness?

*Messenger*

A small thing will put old bodies asleep.

*Oedipus*

So he died of sickness, it seems,—poor old man!

*Messenger*

Yes, and of age—the long years he had measured.

*Oedipus*

Ha! Ha! O dear Jocasta, why should one look to the Pythian hearth? Why should one look to the birds screaming overhead? They prophesied that I should kill my father! But he's dead, and hidden deep in earth, and I stand here who never laid a hand on spear against him,—unless perhaps he died of longing for me, and thus I am his murderer. But they, the oracles, as they stand—he's taken them away with him, they're dead as he himself is, and worthless.

*Jocasta*

That I told you before now.

*Oedipus*

You did, but I was misled by my fear.

*Jocasta*

Then lay no more of them to heart, not one

*Oedipus*

But surely I must fear my mother's bed?

*Jocasta*

Why should man fear since chance is all in all  
for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing?  
Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.  
As to your mother's marriage bed,—don't fear it.  
Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles,  
many a man has lain with his own mother.  
But he to whom such things are nothing bears  
his life most easily.

980

*Oedipus*

All that you say would be said perfectly  
if she were dead; but since she lives I must  
still fear, although you talk so well, Jocasta.

985

*Jocasta*

Still in your father's death there's light of comfort?

*Oedipus*

Great light of comfort; but I fear the living.

*Messenger*

Who is the woman that makes you afraid?

*Oedipus*

Merope, old man, Polybus' wife.

990

*Messenger*

What about her frightens the queen and you?

*Oedipus*

A terrible oracle, stranger, from the Gods.

*Messenger*

Can it be told? Or does the sacred law  
forbid another to have knowledge of it?

*Oedipus*

O no! Once on a time Loxias said  
that I should lie with my own mother and

995

take on my hands the blood of my own father.  
And so for these long years I've lived away  
from Corinth, it has been to my great happiness;  
but yet it's sweet to see the face of parents.

*Messenger*

This was the fear which drove you out of Corinth?

II

*Oedipus*

Old man, I did not wish to kill my father.

*Messenger*

Why should I not free you from this fear, sir,  
since I have come to you in all goodwill?

*Oedipus*

You would not find me thankless if you did.

*Messenger*

Why, it was just for this I brought the news,—  
to earn your thanks when you had come safe home.

I

*Oedipus*

No, I will never come near my parents.

*Messenger*

Son,

it's very plain you don't know what you're doing.

*Oedipus*

What do you mean, old man? For God's sake, tell me.

*Messenger*

If your homecoming is checked by fears like these.

*Oedipus*

Yes, I'm afraid that Phoebus may prove right.

*Messenger*

The murder and the incest?

*Oedipus*

Yes, old man;

that is my constant terror.

*Messenger*

Do you know  
that all your fears are empty?

*Oedipus*

How is that,  
if they are father and mother and I their son?

1015

*Messenger*

Because Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

*Oedipus*

What, was not Polybus my father?

*Messenger*

No more than I but just so much.

*Oedipus*

How can  
my father be my father as much as one  
that's nothing to me?

*Messenger*

Neither he nor I  
begat you.

1020

*Oedipus*

Why then did he call me son?

*Messenger*

A gift he took you from these hands of mine.

*Oedipus*

Did he love so much what he took from another's hand?

*Messenger*

His childlessness before persuaded him.

*Oedipus*

Was I a child you bought or found when I  
was given to him?

1025

*Messenger*

On Cithaeron's slopes  
in the twisting thickets you were found.

*Oedipus*

And why  
were you a traveller in those parts?

*Messenger*

I was  
in charge of mountain flocks.

*Oedipus*

You were a shepherd?  
A hireling vagrant?

*Messenger*

Yes, but at least at that time  
the man that saved your life, son.

10

*Oedipus*

What ailed me when you took me in your arms?

*Messenger*

In that your ankles should be witnesses.

*Oedipus*

Why do you speak of that old pain?

*Messenger*

I loosed you;  
the tendons of your feet were pierced and fettered,—

*Oedipus*

My swaddling clothes brought me a rare disgrace.

1

*Messenger*

So that from this you're called your present name.

*Oedipus*

Was this my father's doing or my mother's?  
For God's sake, tell me.

*Messenger*

I don't know, but he  
who gave you to me has more knowledge than I.

*Oedipus*

You yourself did not find me then? You took me  
from someone else?



*Messenger*

Yes, from another shepherd.

1040

*Oedipus*

Who was he? Do you know him well enough  
to tell?

*Messenger*

He was called Laius' man.

*Oedipus*

You mean the king who reigned here in the old days?

*Messenger*

Yes, he was that man's shepherd.

*Oedipus*

Is he alive

1045

still, so that I could see him?

*Messenger*

You who live here

would know that best.

*Oedipus*

Do any of you here  
know of this shepherd whom he speaks about  
in town or in the fields? Tell me. It's time  
that this was found out once for all.

1050

*Chorus*

I think he is none other than the peasant  
whom you have sought to see already, but  
Jocasta here can tell us best of that.

*Oedipus*

Jocasta, do you know about this man  
whom we have sent for? Is he the man he mentions?

1055

*Jocasta*

Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't give it heed;  
nor try to keep in mind what has been said.  
It will be wasted labour.

*Oedipus*

With such clues  
I could not fail to bring my birth to light.

*Jocasta*

I beg you—do not hunt this out—I beg you,  
if you have any care for your own life.  
What I am suffering is enough.

*Oedipus*

Keep up  
your heart, Jocasta. Though I'm proved a slave,  
thrice slave, and though my mother is thrice slave,  
you'll not be shown to be of lowly lineage.

*Jocasta*

O be persuaded by me, I entreat you;  
do not do this.

*Oedipus*

I will not be persuaded to let be  
the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly

*Jocasta*

It is because I wish you well that I  
give you this counsel—and it's the best counsel.

*Oedipus*

Then the best counsel vexes me, and has  
for some while since.

*Jocasta*

O Oedipus, God help you!  
God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!

*Oedipus*

Here, some one, go and fetch the shepherd for me;  
and let her find her joy in her rich family!

*Jocasta*

O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus!  
that is all I can call you, and the last thing  
that I shall ever call you.

(Exit.)

*Chorus*

Why has the queen gone, Oedipus, in wild  
grief rushing from us? I am afraid that trouble  
will break out of this silence. 1075

*Oedipus*

Break out what will! I at least shall be  
willing to see my ancestry, though humble.  
Perhaps she is ashamed of my low birth,  
for she has all a woman's high-flown pride.  
But I account myself a child of Fortune, 1080  
beneficent Fortune, and I shall not be  
dishonoured. She's the mother from whom I spring;  
the months, my brothers, marked me, now as small,  
and now again as mighty. Such is my breeding,  
and I shall never prove so false to it, 1085  
as not to find the secret of my birth.

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

If I am a prophet and wise of heart  
you shall not fail, Cithaeron, 1090  
by the limitless sky, you shall not!—  
to know at tomorrow's full moon  
that Oedipus honours you,  
as native to him and mother and nurse at once;  
and that you are honoured in dancing by us, as finding favour in  
sight of our king.  
Apollo, to whom we cry, find these things pleasing!

*Antistrophe*

Who was it bore you, child? One of 1098  
the long-lived nymphs who lay with Pan—  
the father who treads the hills?  
Or was she a bride of Loxias, your mother? The grassy slopes  
are all of them dear to him. Or perhaps Cyllene's king 1104  
or the Bacchants' God that lives on the tops

of the hills received you a gift from some  
one of the Helicon Nymphs, with whom he mostly plays?

(Enter an old man, led by Oedipus' servants.)

*Oedipus*

If some one like myself who never met him  
may make a guess,—I think this is the herdsman,  
whom we were seeking. His old age is consonant  
with the other. And besides, the men who bring him  
I recognize as my own servants. You  
perhaps may better me in knowledge since  
you've seen the man before.

1116

111

*Chorus*

You can be sure  
I recognize him. For if Laius  
had ever an honest shepherd, this was he.

*Oedipus*

You, sir, from Corinth, I must ask you first,  
is this the man you spoke of?

112

*Messenger*

This is he  
before your eyes.

*Oedipus*

Old man, look here at me  
and tell me what I ask you. Were you ever  
a servant of King Laius?

*Herdsman*

I was,—  
no slave he bought but reared in his own house.

*Oedipus*

What did you do as work? How did you live?

*Herdsman*

Most of my life was spent among the flocks.

1

*Oedipus*

In what part of the country did you live?

*Herdsmen*

Cithaeron and the places near to it.

*Oedipus*

And somewhere there perhaps you knew this man?

*Herdsmen*

What was his occupation? Who?

*Oedipus*

This man here,  
have you had any dealings with him?

1130

*Herdsmen*

No—  
not such that I can quickly call to mind.

*Messenger*

That is no wonder, master But I'll make him remember what he  
does not know. For I know, that he well knows the country of  
Cithaeron, how he with two flocks, I with one kept company for  
three years—each year half a year—from spring till autumn time  
and then when winter came I drove my flocks to our fold home  
again and he to Laius' steadings. Well—am I right or not in what  
I said we did?

1135

1140

*Herdsmen*

You're right—although it's a long time ago.

*Messenger*

Do you remember giving me a child  
to bring up as my foster child?

*Herdsmen*

What's this?  
Why do you ask this question?

*Messenger*

Look old man,  
here he is—here's the man who was that child!

1145

*Herdsmen*

Death take you! Won't you hold your tongue?

*Oedipus*

No, no,  
do not find fault with him, old man. Your words  
are more at fault than his.

*Herdsmen*

O best of masters,  
how do I give offense?

*Oedipus*

When you refuse  
to speak about the child of whom he asks you.

*Herdsmen*

He speaks out of his ignorance, without meaning

*Oedipus*

If you'll not talk to gratify me, you  
will talk with pain to urge you.

*Herdsmen*

O please, sir,  
don't hurt an old man, sir.

*Oedipus (to the servants)*

Here, one of you,  
twist his hands behind him.

*Herdsmen*

Why, God help me, why?  
What do you want to know?

*Oedipus*

You gave a child  
to him,—the child he asked you of?

*Herdsmen*

I did.  
I wish I'd died the day I did.

*Oedipus*

You will  
unless you tell me truly.

*Herdsmen*

And I'll die  
far worse if I should tell you.

*Oedipus*

This fellow  
is bent on more delays, as it would seem. 1160

*Herdsmen*

O no, no! I have told you that I gave it.

*Oedipus*

Where did you get this child from? Was it your own or did you  
get it from another?

*Herdsmen*

Not  
my own at all; I had it from some one.

*Oedipus*

One of these citizens? or from what house?

*Herdsmen*

O master, please—I beg you, master, please  
don't ask me more. 1165

*Oedipus*

You're a dead man if I  
ask you again.

*Herdsmen*

It was one of the children  
of Laius.

*Oedipus*

A slave? Or born in wedlock?

*Herdsmen*

O God, I am on the brink of frightful speech.

*Oedipus*

And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear. 1170

*Herdsmen*

The child was called his child; but she within,  
your wife would tell you best how all this was.

*Oedipus*

She gave it to you?

*Herdsmen*

Yes, she did, my lord.

*Oedipus*

To do what with it?

*Herdsmen*

Make away with it.

*Oedipus*

She was so hard—its mother?

*Herdsmen*

Aye, through fear

of evil oracles.

*Oedipus*

Which?

*Herdsmen*

They said that he

should kill his parents.

*Oedipus*

How was it that you

gave it away to this old man?

*Herdsmen*

O master,

I pitied it, and thought that I could send it

off to another country and this man

was from another country But he saved it

for the most terrible troubles. If you are

the man he says you are, you're bred to misery.

*Oedipus*

O, O, O, they will all come,

all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me

look upon you no more after today!

I who first saw the light bred of a match

accursed, and accursed in my living

with them I lived with, cursed in my killing.

*(Exeunt all but the Chorus.)*



*Chorus*

*Strophe*

O generations of men, how I  
count you as equal with those who live  
not at all!

What man, what man on earth wins more  
of happiness than a seeming  
and after that turning away?

1190

Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,  
Oedipus, you and your fate!  
Luckless Oedipus, whom of all men  
I envy not at all.

1196

*Antistrophe*

In as much as he shot his bolt  
beyond the others and won the prize  
of happiness complete—  
O Zeus—and killed and reduced to nought  
the hooked taloned maid of the riddling speech,  
standing a tower against death for my land:  
hence he was called my king and hence  
was honoured the highest of all  
honours; and hence he ruled  
in the great city of Thebes.

*Strophe*

But now whose tale is more miserable?  
Who is there lives with a savager fate?  
Whose troubles so reverse his life as his?

1204

O Oedipus, the famous prince  
for whom a great haven  
the same both as father and son  
sufficed for generation,  
how, O how, have the furrows ploughed  
by your father endured to bear you, poor wretch,  
and hold their peace so long?

*Antistrophe*

Time who sees all has found you out  
against your will, judges your marriage accursed,  
begetter and begot at one in it

O child of Laius,  
would I had never seen you.  
I weep for you and cry  
a dirge of lamentation.

To speak directly, I drew my breath  
from you at the first and so now I lull  
my mouth to sleep with your name

(Enter a second messenger.)

*Second Messenger*

O Princes always honoured by our country,  
what deeds you'll hear of and what horrors see,  
what grief you'll feel, if you as true born Thebans  
care for the house of Labdacus's sons  
Phasis nor Ister cannot purge this house,  
I think, with all their streams, such things  
it hides, such evils shortly will bring forth  
into the light, whether they will or not;  
and troubles hurt the most  
when they prove self-inflicted.

*Chorus*

What we had known before did not fall short  
of bitter groaning's worth; what's more to tell?

*Second Messenger*

Shortest to hear and tell—our glorious queen  
Jocasta's dead.

*Chorus*

Unhappy woman! How?

*Second Messenger*

By her own hand. The worst of what was done  
you cannot know. You did not see the sight.  
Yet in so far as I remember it

you'll hear the end of our unlucky queen. 1240  
 When she came raging into the house she went  
 straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair  
 with both her hands, and crying upon Laius 1245  
 long dead—Do you remember, Laius,  
 that night long past which bred a child for us  
 to send you to your death and leave  
 a mother making children with her son?  
 And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which  
 she brought forth husband by her husband, children 1250  
 by her own child, an infamous double bond.  
 How after that she died I do not know,—  
 for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.  
 He burst upon us shouting and we looked  
 to him as he paced frantically around,  
 begging us always. Give me a sword, I say, 1255  
 to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb,  
 this field of double sowing whence I sprang  
 and where I sowed my children! As he raved  
 some god showed him the way—none of us there.  
 Bellowing terribly and led by some 1260  
 invisible guide he rushed on the two doors,—  
 wrenching the hollow bolts out of their sockets,  
 he charged inside. There, there, we saw his wife  
 hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.  
 When he saw her, he cried out fearfully 1265  
 and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,  
 poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,  
 was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—  
 the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—  
 away from her and lifting them up high  
 dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out 1270  
 such things as: they will never see the crime  
 I have committed or had done upon me!  
 Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on  
 forbidden faces, do not recognize

those whom you long for—with such imprecations  
he struck his eyes again and yet again  
with the brooches And the bleeding eyeballs gushed  
and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops  
but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.

12

So it has broken—and not on one head  
but troubles mixed for husband and for wife.  
The fortune of the days gone by was true  
good fortune—but today groans and destruction  
and death and shame—of all ills can be named  
not one is missing.

1

1

*Chorus*

Is he now in any ease from pain?

*Second Messenger*

He shouts

for some one to unbar the doors and show him  
to all the men of Thebes, his father's killer,  
his mother's—no I cannot say the word,  
it is unholy—for he'll cast himself,  
out of the land, he says, and not remain  
to bring a curse upon his house, the curse  
he called upon it in his proclamation But  
he wants for strength, aye, and some one to guide him,  
his sickness is too great to bear. You, too,  
will be shown that. The bolts are opening.  
Soon you will see a sight to waken pity  
even in the horror of it.

*(Enter the blinded Oedipus.)*

*Chorus*

This is a terrible sight for men to see!  
I never found a worse!  
Poor wretch, what madness came upon you!  
What evil spirit leaped upon your life  
to your ill-luck—a leap beyond man's strength!  
Indeed I pity you, but I cannot

look at you, though there's much I want to ask  
and much to learn and much to see. 1305  
I shudder at the sight of you.

*Oedipus*

O, O,  
where am I going? Where is my voice 1310  
borne on the wind to and fro?  
Spirit, how far have you sprung?

*Chorus*

To a terrible place whereof men's ears  
may not hear, nor their eyes behold it.

*Oedipus*

Darkness!  
Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless, unspeakable visitant sped  
by an ill wind in haste! 1315  
madness and stabbing pain and memory  
of evil deeds I have done!

*Chorus*

In such misfortunes it's no wonder  
if double weighs the burden of your grief. 1320

*Oedipus*

My friend,  
you are the only one steadfast, the only one that attends on me;  
you still stay nursing the blind man.  
Your care is not unnoticed. I can know 1325  
your voice, although this darkness is my world.

*Chorus*

Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare  
so far to do despite to your own eyes?  
what spirit urged you to it?

*Oedipus*

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,  
that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion. 1330  
But the hand that struck me

was none but my own.  
Why should I see  
whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see?

I

*Chorus*

These things are as you say.

*Oedipus*

What can I see to love?  
What greeting can touch my ears with joy?  
Take me away, and haste—to a place out of the way!  
Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable,  
the most accursed, whom God too hates  
above all men on earth!

I

I

*Chorus*

Unhappy in your mind and your misfortune,  
would I had never known you!

*Oedipus*

Curse on the man who took  
the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay in the field.  
He stole me from death and saved me,  
no kindly service.  
Had I died then  
I would not be so burdensome to friends.

*Chorus*

I, too, could have wished it had been so.

*Oedipus*

Then I would not have come  
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.  
Now I am godless and child of impurity,  
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.  
If there is any ill worse than ill,  
that is the lot of Oedipus.

*Chorus*

I cannot say your remedy was good;  
you would be better dead than blind and living.

*Oedipus*

What I have done here was best done—don't tell me  
otherwise, do not give me further counsel. 1370

I do not know with what eyes I could look  
upon my father when I die and go  
under the earth, nor yet my wretched mother—  
those two to whom I have done things deserving  
worse punishment than hanging. Would the sight  
of children, bred as mine are, gladden me? 1375

No, not these eyes, never. And my city,  
its towers and sacred places of the Gods,  
of these I robbed my miserable self  
when I commanded all to drive *him* out,  
the criminal since proved by God impure  
and of the race of Latus. 1380

To this guilt I bore witness against myself—  
with what eyes shall I look upon my people? 1385

No. If there were a means to choke the fountain  
of hearing I would not have stayed my hand  
from locking up my miserable carcase,  
seeing and hearing nothing; it is sweet  
to keep our thoughts out of the range of hurt. 1390

Cithaeron, why did you receive me? why  
having received me did you not kill me straight?  
And so I had not shown to men my birth.

O Polybus and Corinth and the house,  
the old house that I used to call my father's— 1395  
what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness  
festered beneath! Now I am found to be

a sinner and a son of sinners. Crossroads,  
and hidden glade, oak and the narrow way  
at the crossroads, that drank my father's blood  
offered you by my hands, do you remember  
still what I did as you looked on, and what  
I did when I came here? O marriage, marriage! 1400

you bred me and again when you had bred  
bred children of your child and showed to men  
brides, wives and mothers and the foulest deeds  
that can be in this world of ours.

I

Come—it's unfit to say what is unfit  
to do.—I beg of you in God's name hide me  
somewhere outside your country, yes, or kill me,  
or throw me into the sea, to be forever  
out of your sight. Approach and deign to touch me  
for all my wretchedness, and do not fear.  
No man but I can bear my evil doom.

I

*Chorus*

Here Creon comes in fit time to perform  
or give advice in what you ask of us.  
Creon is left sole ruler in your stead.

*Oedipus*

Creon! Creon! What shall I say to him?  
How can I justly hope that he will trust me?  
In what is past I have been proved towards him  
an utter liar.

(*Enter Creon.*)

*Creon*

Oedipus, I've come  
not so that I might laugh at you nor taunt you  
with evil of the past. But if you still  
are without shame before the face of men  
reverence at least the flame that gives all life,  
our Lord the Sun, and do not show unveiled  
to him pollution such that neither land  
nor holy rain nor light of day can welcome.

(*To a servant.*)

Be quick and take him in. It is most decent  
that only kin should see and hear the troubles  
of kin.



*Oedipus*

I beg you, since you've torn me from  
my dreadful expectations and have come  
in a most noble spirit to a man  
that has used you vilely—do a thing for me.  
I shall speak for your own good, not for my own.

*Creon*

What do you need that you would ask of me?

1435

*Oedipus*

Drive me from here with all the speed you can  
to where I may not hear a human voice.

*Creon*

Be sure, I would have done this had not I  
wished first of all to learn from the God the course  
of action I should follow.

*Oedipus*

But his word  
has been quite clear to let the parricide,  
the sinner, die.

1440

*Creon*

Yes, that indeed was said.  
But in the present need we had best discover  
what we should do.

*Oedipus*

And will you ask about  
a man so wretched?

*Creon*

Now even you will trust  
the God.

1445

*Oedipus*

So, I command you—and will beseech you—  
to her that lies inside that house give burial  
as you would have it; she is yours and rightly  
you will perform the rites for her. For me—

never let this my father's city have me  
living a dweller in it. Leave me live  
in the mountains where Cithaeron is, that's called  
my mountain, which my mother and my father  
while they were living would have made my tomb.  
So I may die by their decree who sought  
indeed to kill me. Yet I know this much:  
no sickness and no other thing will kill me.  
I would not have been saved from death if not  
for some strange evil fate. Well, let my fate  
go where it will.

Creon, you need not care  
about my sons; they're men and so wherever  
they are, they will not lack a livelihood.  
But my two girls—so sad and pitiful—  
whose table never stood apart from mine,  
and everything I touched they always shared—  
O Creon, have a thought for them! And most  
I wish that you might suffer me to touch them  
and sorrow with them.

*(Enter Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus' two daughters.)*

O my lord! O true noble Creon! Can I  
really be touching them, as when I saw?  
What shall I say?  
Yes, I can hear them sobbing—my two darlings!  
and Creon has had pity and has sent me  
what I loved most?  
Am I right?

*Creon*

You're right: it was I gave you this  
because I knew from old days how you loved them  
as I see now.

*Oedipus*

God bless you for it, Creon,  
and may God guard you better on your road  
than he did me!

O children, 1480  
 where are you? Come here, come to my hands,  
 a brother's hands which turned your father's eyes,  
 those bright eyes you knew once, to what you see,  
 a father seeing nothing, knowing nothing,  
 begetting you from his own source of life. 1485  
 I weep for you—I cannot see your faces—  
 I weep when I think of the bitterness  
 there will be in your lives, how you must live  
 before the world. At what assemblages  
 of citizens will you make one? to what 1490  
 gay company will you go and not come home  
 in tears instead of sharing in the holiday?  
 And when you're ripe for marriage, who will he be,  
 the man who'll risk to take such infamy  
 as shall cling to my children, to bring hurt 1495  
 on them and those that marry with them? What  
 curse is not there? "Your father killed his father  
 and sowed the seed where he had sprung himself  
 and begot you out of the womb that held him."  
 These insults you will hear. Then who will marry you? 1500  
 No one, my children; clearly you are doomed  
 to waste away in barrenness unmarried.  
 Son of Menoeceus, since you are all the father  
 left these two girls, and we, their parents, both 1505  
 are dead to them—do not allow them wander  
 like beggars, poor and husbandless.  
 They are of your own blood.  
 And do not make them equal with myself  
 in wretchedness; for you can see them now  
 so young, so utterly alone, save for you only.  
 Touch my hand, noble Creon, and say yes. 1510  
 If you were older, children, and were wiser,  
 there's much advice I'd give you. But as it is,  
 let this be what you pray: give me a life

wherever there is opportunity  
to live, and better life than was my father's.

*Creon*

Your tears have had enough of scope; now go within the house.

*Oedipus*

I must obey, though bitter of heart.

*Creon*

In season, all is good.

*Oedipus*

Do you know on what conditions I obey?

*Creon*

You tell me them,  
and I shall know them when I hear.

*Oedipus*

That you shall send me out  
to live away from Thebes.

*Creon*

That gift you must ask of the God.

*Oedipus*

But I'm now hated by the Gods.

*Creon*

So quickly you'll obtain your prayer.

*Oedipus*

You consent then?

*Creon*

What I do not mean, I do not use to say.

*Oedipus*

Now lead me away from here.

*Creon*

Let go the children, then, and come.

*Oedipus*

Do not take them from me.

*Creon*

Do not seek to be master in everything,  
for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your  
life.

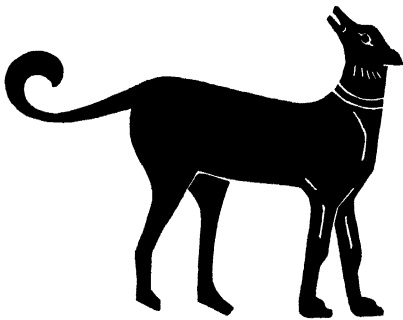
*(As Creon and Oedipus go out.)*

*Chorus*

You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus,—  
him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful; 1525  
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—  
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!  
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till  
he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain. 1530

OEDIPUS  
AT  
COLONUS

*Translated by*  
ROBERT FITZGERALD



## CHARACTERS

*Oedipus*

*Antigone*

*A Stranger*

*Ismene*

*Theseus*

*Creon*

*Polyneices*

*A Messenger*

*Chorus*

## OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

*Long after he had left Thebes, the blinded OEDIPUS came with ANTIGONE to the Attic deme of COLONUS, where the oracle of Apollo had prophesied that he was to die.*

SCENE *Like the theatre, is in the open air. In the background is the grove of the Furies at Colonus in Attica, about a mile northwest of Athens. A statue or stele of Colonus, a legendary horseman and hero, can be seen stage left. Stage right, a flat rock jutting out among the trees of the grove. Downstage, center, another ridge of rock.*

TIME: *Early afternoon of a day about twenty years after the action of King Oedipus.*

### SCENE I

*(Oedipus, old, blind, bearded and ragged, but carrying himself well, enters stage right, led by Antigone.)*

*Oedipus*

My daughter—daughter of the blind old man—

Where, I wonder, have we come to now?

What place is this, Antigone? What people?

Who will be kind to Oedipus this evening

And give the wanderer charity?

Though he ask little and receive still less,

It is sufficient:

Suffering and time,

Vast time, have been instructors in contentment,

Which kingliness teaches too.

But now, child,

If you can see a place where we might rest,

Some public place or consecrated park,

Let me stop and sit down there.

And then let us inquire where we may be.

5

10



As foreigners and strangers we must learn  
From the local people, and do as they direct.

*Antigone*

Father, poor tired Oedipus, the towers  
That crown the city still seem far away;  
As for this place, it is clearly a holy one,  
Shady with vines and olive trees and laurel;  
Snug in their wings within, the nightingales  
Make a sweet music.

15

Rest on this rough stone.

It was a long road for an old man to travel.

20

*Oedipus*

Help me sit down; take care of the blind man.

*Antigone*

After so long, you need not tell me, father.

*Oedipus*

And now have you any idea where we are?

*Antigone*

This place I do not know; the city is Athens.

*Oedipus*

Yes, everyone we met has told us that.

25

*Antigone*

Then shall I go and ask?

*Oedipus*

Do, child, if there is any life near-by.

*Antigone*

Oh, but indeed there is; I need not leave you;  
I see a man, now, not far away from us.

*Oedipus*

Is he coming this way? Has he started towards us?

30

(*The Stranger enters, left.*)

*Antigone*

Here he is now.

Say what seems best to you,  
Father; the man is here

*Oedipus*

Friend, my daughter's eyes serve for my own.  
She tells me we are fortunate enough to meet you,  
And no doubt you will inform us—

35

*Stranger*

Do not go on;  
First move from where you sit; the place is holy;  
It is forbidden to walk upon that ground.

*Oedipus*

What ground is this? What god is honored here?

*Stranger*

It is not to be touched, no one may live upon it;  
Most dreadful are its divinities, most feared,  
Daughters of darkness and mysterious earth.

40

*Oedipus*

Under what solemn name shall I invoke them?

*Stranger*

The people here prefer to address them as Gentle  
All-seeing Ones; elsewhere there are other names.

*Oedipus*

Then may they be gentle to the suppliant.  
For I shall never leave this resting place.

45

*Stranger*

What is the meaning of this?

*Oedipus*

It was ordained;  
I recognize it now.

*Stranger*

Without authority  
From the city government I dare not move you;  
First I must show them what it is you are doing.

*Oedipus*

Friend, in the name of God, bear with me now!  
I turn to you for light; answer the wanderer.

50

*Stranger*

Speak. You will not find me discourteous.

*Oedipus*

What is this region into which I've come?

*Stranger*

Whatever I can tell you, I will tell.  
This country, all of it, is blessed ground;  
The god of the sea loves it; in it the firecarrier  
Prometheus has his influence; in particular  
That spot you rest on has been called this earth's  
Doorsill of Brass, and buttress of great Athens.  
All men of this land claim descent from him  
Whose statue stands near-by: Colonus the horseman,  
And bear his name in common with their own.  
That is this country, stranger: honored less  
In histories than in the hearts of the people.

55

60

*Oedipus*

Then people live in the land?

*Stranger*

Yes, certainly,  
The clan of those descended from that hero.

65

*Oedipus*

Ruled by a king? Or do the people rule?

*Stranger*

The land is governed from Athens, by Athens' king.

*Oedipus*

And who is he whose word has power here?

*Stranger*

Theseus, son of Aegeus, the king before him.

*Oedipus*

Ah. Would someone then go to this king for me?

70

*Stranger*

To tell him what? Perhaps to urge his coming?

*Oedipus*

To tell him a small favor will gain him much.

*Stranger*

What service can a blind man render him?

*Oedipus*

All I shall say will be clear-sighted indeed

*Stranger*

Listen, stranger I wish you no injury,  
You seem well-born, though obviously unlucky,  
Stay where you are, exactly where I found you,  
And I'll inform the people of what you say—  
Not in the town, but here—it rests with them  
To decide if you should stay or must move on

75

80

*(Exit Stranger, left.)*

*Oedipus*

Child, has he gone?

*Antigone*

Yes, father. Now you may speak tranquilly,  
For only I am with you

*Oedipus (praying)*

Ladies whose eyes  
Are terrible: Spirits: upon your sacred ground  
I have first bent my knees in this new land;  
Therefore be mindful of me and of Apollo,  
For when he gave me oracles of evil,  
He also spoke of this:

85

A resting place,  
After long years, in the last country, where  
I should find home among the sacred Furies:  
That there I might round out my bitter life,  
Conferring benefit on those who received me,  
A curse on those who have driven me away.

90

Portents, he said, would make me sure of this:  
Earthquake, thunder, or God's smiling lightning; 95  
But I am sure of it now, sure that you guided me  
With feathery influence upon this road,  
And led me here into your hallowed wood.

How otherwise could I, in my wandering,  
Have sat down first with you in all this land, 100  
I who drink not, with you who love not wine?

How otherwise had I found this chair of stone?  
Grant me then, goddesses, passage from life at last,  
And consummation, as the unearthly voice foretold,  
Unless indeed I seem not worth your grace:  
Slave as I am to such unending pain 105  
As no man had before.

O hear my prayer,  
Sweet children of original Darkness! Hear me,  
Athens, city named for great Athena,  
Honored above all cities in the world!  
Pity a man's poor carcase and his ghost,  
For Oedipus is not the strength he was. 110

*Antigone*

Be still. Some elderly men are coming this way,  
Looking for the place where you are seated.

*Oedipus*

I shall be still. You get me clear of the path,  
And hide me in the wood, so I may hear  
What they are saying. If we know their temper 115  
We shall be better able to act with prudence.

*(Oedipus and Antigone withdraw into the grove.)*

#### CHORAL DIALOGUE

*(The Chorus enters from the left. Here, and throughout the  
play, its lines may be taken by various members as  
seems suitable.)*

*Chorus*

Look for him Who could he be? Where  
Is he? Where is the stranger  
Impious, blasphemous, shameless! 120  
Use your eyes, search him out!  
Cover the ground and uncover him!  
Vagabond!  
The old man must be a vagabond,  
Not of our land, for he'd never 125  
Otherwise dare to go in there,  
In the inviolate thicket  
Of those whom it's futile to fight,  
Those whom we tremble to name.  
When we pass we avert our eyes—  
Close our eyes!— 130  
In silence, without conversation,  
Shaping our prayers with our lips.  
But now, if the story is credible,  
Some alien fool has profaned it;  
Yet I have looked over all the grove and 135  
Still cannot see him;  
Cannot say where he has hidden.

*(Oedipus comes forward from the wood.)*

*Oedipus*

That stranger is I. As they say of the blind,  
Sounds are the things I see.

*Chorus*

Ah! 140  
His face is dreadful! His voice is dreadful!

*Oedipus*

Do not regard me, please, as a law-breaker.

*Chorus*

Zeus defend us, who is this old man?

*Oedipus*

One whose fate is not quite to be envied,

O my masters, and men of this land; 145  
That must be evident: why, otherwise,  
Should I need this girl  
To lead me, her frailty to put my weight on?

*Chorus*

Ah! His eyes are blind! 150  
And were you brought into the world so?  
Unhappy life—and so long!  
Well, not if I can help it,  
Will you have this curse besides.—

Stranger! you 155  
Trespass there! But beyond there,  
In the glade where the grass is still,  
Where the honeyed libations drip  
In the rill from the brimming spring,  
You must not step! O stranger, 160  
It is well to be careful about it!

Most careful!  
Stand aside and come down then!  
There is too much space between us!  
Say, wanderer, can you hear? 165  
If you have a mind to tell us  
Your business, or wish to converse with our council,  
Come down from that place!  
Only speak where it's proper to do so!

*Oedipus*

Now, daughter, what is the way of wisdom? 170

*Antigone*

We must do just as they do here, father;  
We should give in now, and listen to them.

*Oedipus*

Stretch out your hand to me.

*Antigone*

There, I am near you.

*Oedipus*

Sirs, let there be no injustice done me,  
Once I have trusted you, and left my refuge.

175

*(Led by Antigone, he starts downstage.)*

*Chorus*

Never, never, will anyone drive you away  
From rest in this land, old man!

*Oedipus*

Shall I come further?

*Chorus*

Yes, further.

*Oedipus*

And now?

*Chorus*

You must guide him, girl;  
You can see how much further to come.

180

*Antigone*

Come with your blind step, father;  
This way; come where I lead you.

*Chorus*

Though the land is strange, newcomer,  
You've weathered much; take heart;  
What the state has long held hateful,  
Hate, and respect what it loves.

185

*Oedipus*

Lead me on, then, child,  
To where we may speak or listen respectfully;  
Let us not fight necessity.

190

*Chorus*

Now! Go no further than that platform there,  
Formed of the natural rock.

*Oedipus*

This?



*Chorus*

Far enough; you can hear us.

*Oedipus*

Shall I sit down?

*Chorus*

Yes, sit there

195

To the left on the ridge of the rock.

*Antigone*

Father, this is where I can help you;

You must keep step with me, gently now.

*Oedipus*

Ah, me!

*Antigone*

Lean your old body on my arm;

200

It is I who love you; let yourself down.

*Oedipus*

How bitter blindness is!

*(He is seated on the rock downstage, center.)*

*Chorus*

Now that you are at rest, poor man,

Tell us, what is your name?

Who are you, wanderer?

205

What is the land of your ancestors?

*Oedipus*

I am an exile, friends; but do not ask me . . .

*Chorus*

What is it you fear to say, old man?

*Oedipus*

No, no, no! Do not go on

210

Questioning me! Do not ask my name!

*Chorus*

Why not?

*Oedipus*

My star was unspeakable

*Chorus*

Speak!

*Oedipus*

My child, what can I say to them?

*Chorus*

Answer us, stranger; what is your race,

Who was your father?

215

*Oedipus*

God help me, what will become of me, child?

*Antigone*

Tell them; there is no other way.

*Oedipus*

Well, then, I will; I cannot hide it.

*Chorus*

Between you, you greatly delay. Speak up!

*Oedipus*

Have you heard of Laius' family?

*Chorus*

Ah!

220

*Oedipus*

Of the race of Labdacidae?

*Chorus*

Ah, Zeus!

*Oedipus*

And ruined Oedipus?

*Chorus*

You are he!

*Oedipus*

Do not take fright from what I say—

*Chorus*

Oh, dreadful!

*Oedipus*

I am accursed.

*Chorus*

Oh, fearful!

*Oedipus*

Antigone, what will happen now?

225

*Chorus*

Away with you! Out with you! Leave our country!

*Oedipus*

And what of the promises you made me?

*Chorus*

God will not punish the man  
Who makes return for an injury.

Deceivers may be deceived:

230

They play a game that ends

In grief, and not in pleasure.

Leave this grove at once!

Our country is not for you!

Wind no further

235

Your clinging evil upon us!

*Antigone*

O men of reverent mind!

Since you will not suffer my father,

Old man though he is,

And though you know his story—

He never knew what he did—

240

Take pity still on my unhappiness,

And let me intercede with you for him.

Not with lost eyes, but looking in your eyes

As if I were a child of yours, I beg

245

Mercy for him, the beaten man! O hear me!

We are thrown upon your mercy as on God's;

Be kinder than you seem!

By all you have and own that is dear to you:

Children, wives, possessions, gods, I pray you!

250

For you will never see in all the world  
A man whom God has led  
Escape his destiny!

SCENE 2

*Chorus*

Child of Oedipus, indeed we pity you,  
Just as we pity him for his misfortune; 255  
But we tremble to think of what the gods may do;  
We could not dare to speak more generously!

*Oedipus*

What use is reputation then? What good  
Comes of a noble name? A noble fiction!  
For Athens, so they say, excels in piety; 260  
Has power to save the wretched of other lands;  
Can give them refuge; is unique in this.  
Yet, when it comes to me, where is her refuge?  
You pluck me from these rocks and cast me out,  
All for fear of a name!

Or do you dread 265  
My strength? my actions? I think not, for I  
Suffered those deeds more than I acted them,  
As I might show if it were fitting here  
To tell my father's and my mother's story . . .  
For which you fear me, as I know too well.

And yet, how was I evil in myself? 270  
I had been wronged, I retaliated; even had I  
Known what I was doing, was that evil?  
Then, knowing nothing, I went on. Went on.  
But those who wronged me knew, and ruined me.

Therefore I beg of you before the gods, 275  
For the same cause that made you move me—  
In reverence of your gods—give me this shelter,  
And thus accord those powers what is theirs.  
Think: their eyes are fixed upon the just,

Fixed on the unjust, too; no impious man 280  
 Can twist away from them forever.  
 Now, in their presence, do not blot your city's  
 Luster by bending to unholy action;  
 As you would receive an honest petitioner,  
 Give me, too, sanctuary; though my face 285  
 Be dreadful in its look, yet honor me!  
 For I come here as one endowed with grace  
 By those who are over Nature; and I bring  
 Advantage to this race, as you may learn  
 More fully when some lord of yours is here 290  
 Meanwhile be careful to be just.

*Chorus*

Old man,  
 This argument of yours compels our wonder.  
 It was not feebly worded. I am content  
 That higher authorities should judge this matter. 295

*Oedipus*

And where is he who rules the land, strangers?

*Chorus*

In his father's city; but the messenger  
 Who sent us here has gone to fetch him also.

*Oedipus*

Do you think a blind man will so interest him  
 As to bring him such a distance? 300

*Chorus*

I do, indeed, when he has heard your name.

*Oedipus*

But who will tell him that?

*Chorus*

It is a long road, and the rumors of travellers  
 Have a way of wandering. He will have word of them;  
 Take heart—he will be here. Old man, your name 305

Has gone over all the earth; though he may be  
At rest when the news comes, he will come quickly.

*Oedipus*

Then may he come with luck for his own city,  
As well as for me. . . . The good befriend themselves.

*Antigone*

O Zeus! What shall I say? How interpret this? 310

*Oedipus*

Antigone, my dear child, what is it?

*Antigone*

A woman

Riding a Sicilian pony and coming towards us;  
She is wearing the wide Thessalian sun-hat;  
I don't know! 315

Is it or isn't it? Or am I dreaming?  
I think so; yes!—No. I can't be sure. . . .

Ah, poor child,  
It is no one else but she! And she is smiling 320  
Now as she comes! It is my dear Ismene!

*Oedipus*

What did you say, child?

(*Ismene enters, with one Attendant.*)

*Antigone*

That I see your daughter!

My sister! Now you can tell her by her voice.

*Ismene*

O father and sister together! Dearest voices!  
Now I have found you—how, I scarcely know— 325  
I don't know how I shall see you through my tears!

*Oedipus*

Child, you have come?

*Ismene*

Father, how old you seem!

*Oedipus*

Child, are you here?

*Ismene*

And such a time I had!

*Oedipus*

Touch me, little one.

*Ismene*

I shall hold you both!

*Oedipus*

My children . . . and sisters.

*Ismene*

Oh, unhappy people!

330

*Oedipus*

She and I?

*Ismene*

And I with you, unhappy.

*Oedipus*

But, child, why have you come?

*Ismene*

For your sake, father.

*Oedipus*

You missed me?

*Ismene*

Yes; and I have news for you.

I came with the one person I could trust.

*Oedipus*

Why, where are your brothers? Could they not do it?

335

*Ismene*

They are—where they are. It is a hard time for them.

*Oedipus*

Ah! They behave as if they were Egyptians,

Bred the Egyptian way! Down there, the men

Sit indoors all day long, weaving;

The women go out and attend to business.

340

Just so your brothers, who should have done this work

Sit by the fire like home-loving girls,  
And you two, in their place, must bear my hardships.

One, since her childhood ended and her body  
Gained its power, has wandered ever with me, 345  
An old man's governess, often in the wild  
Forest going without shoes, and hungry,  
Beaten by many rains, tired by the sun; 350  
Yet she rejected the sweet life of home  
So that her father should have sustenance.

And you, my daughter, once before came out,  
Unknown to Thebes, bringing me news of all  
The oracle had said concerning me; 355  
And you remained my faithful outpost there,  
When I was driven from that land.

But now,

What news, Ismene, do you bring your father?  
Why have you left your house to make this journey?  
You came for no light reason, I know that;  
It must be something serious for me. 360

*Ismene*

I will pass over the troubles I have had  
Searching for your whereabouts, father.  
They were hard enough to bear; and I will not  
Go through it all again in telling of them.  
In any case, it is your sons' troubles 365  
That I have come to tell you.  
First it was their desire, as it was Creon's,  
That the throne should pass to him; that thus the city  
Should be defiled no longer: such was their reasoning  
When they considered our people's ancient curse  
And how it enthralled your pitiful family. 370  
But then some fury put it in their hearts—  
O pitiful again!—to itch for power:  
For seizure of prerogative and throne;  
And it was the younger and the less mature



Who stripped his elder brother, Polyneices,  
Of place and kingship, and then banished him. 375

But now the people hear he has gone to Argos,  
Into the valley land, has joined that nation,  
And is enlisting friends among its warriors,  
Telling them Argos shall honorably win 380  
Thebes and her plain, or else eternal glory.  
This is not a mere recital, father;  
But terrible truth!

How long will it be, I wonder,  
Before the gods take pity on your distress?

*Oedipus*  
You have some hope then that they are concerned 385  
With my deliverance?

*Ismene*  
I have, father.  
The latest sentences of the oracle . . .

*Oedipus*  
How are they worded? What do they prophesy?

*Ismene*  
That you shall be much solicited by our people  
Before your death—and after—for their welfare. 390

*Oedipus*  
And what could anyone hope from such as I?

*Ismene*  
The oracles declare their strength's in you—

*Oedipus*  
When I am finished, I suppose I am strong!

*Ismene*  
For the gods who threw you down sustain you now.

*Oedipus*  
Slight favor, now I am old! My doom was early. 395

*Ismene*

The proof of it is that Creon is coming to you  
For that same reason, and soon: not by and by.

*Oedipus*

To do what, daughter? Tell me about this.

*Ismene*

To settle you near the land of Thebes, and so  
Have you at hand; but you may not cross the border. 400

*Oedipus*

What good am I to them outside the country?

*Ismene*

It is merely that if your burial were unlucky,  
That would be perilous for them.

*Oedipus*

Ah, then!

No god's assistance is needed in comprehending.

*Ismene*

Therefore they want to keep you somewhere near,  
Just at the border, where you'll not be free. 405

*Oedipus*

And will they compose my shade with Theban dust?

*Ismene*

Ah, father! No. Your father's blood forbids it.

*Oedipus*

Then they shall never hold me in their power!

*Ismene*

If so, some day it will be bitter for them.

*Oedipus*

How will that be, my child?

*Ismene*

When they shall stand 410  
Where you are buried, and feel your anger there.

*Oedipus*

What you have said—from whom did you hear it, child?

*Ismene*

The envoys told me when they returned from Delphi.

*Oedipus*

Then all this about me was spoken there?

*Ismene*

According to those men, just come to Thebes.

415

*Oedipus*

Has either of my sons had word of this?

*Ismene*

They both have, and they understand it well

*Oedipus*

The scoundrels! So they knew all this, and yet  
Would not give up the throne to have me back?

*Ismene*

It hurts me to hear it, but I can't deny it.

420

*Oedipus*

Gods!

Put not their fires of ambition out!

Let the last word be mine upon this battle

They are about to join, with the spears lifting!

I'd see that the one who holds the sceptre now

425

Would not have power long, nor would the other,

The banished one, return!

These were the two

Who saw me in disgrace and banishment

And never lifted a hand for me. They heard me

Howled from the country, heard the thing proclaimed!

430

And will they say I wanted exile then,

An appropriate clemency, granted by the state?

That is all false! The truth is that at first

My mind was a boiling caldron; nothing so sweet  
 As death, death by stoning, could have been given me; 435  
 Yet no one there would grant me that desire.  
 It was only later, when my madness cooled,  
 And I had begun to think my rage excessive,  
 My punishment too great for what I had done;  
 Then it was that the city—in its good time!— 440  
 Decided to be harsh, and drove me out.  
 They could have helped me then, they could have  
 Helped him who begot them! Would they do it?  
 For lack of a little word from that fine pair  
 Out I went, like a beggar, to wander forever! 445  
 Only by grace of these two girls, unaided,  
 Have I got food or shelter or devotion;  
 The others held their father of less worth  
 Than sitting on a throne and being king.  
 Well, they shall never win me in their fight! 450  
 Nor will they profit from the rule of Thebes.  
 I am sure of that; I have heard the prophecies  
 Brought by this girl; I think they fit those others  
 Spoken so long ago, and now fulfilled.  
 So let Creon be sent to find me. Creon, 455  
 Or any other of influence in the state.  
 If you men here consent—as do those powers  
 Holy and awful, the spirits of this place—  
 To give me refuge, then shall this city have  
 A great savior; and woe to my enemies! 460

*Chorus*

Oedipus: you are surely worth our pity:  
 You, and your children, too. And since you claim  
 Also to be a savior of our land,  
 I'd like to give you counsel for good luck.

*Oedipus*

Dear friend! I'll do whatever you advise. 465

*Chorus*

Make expiation to these divinities  
Whose ground you violated when you came.

*Oedipus*

In what way shall I do so? Tell me, friends.

*Chorus*

First you must bring libations from the spring  
That runs forever; and bring them with clean hands.

470

*Oedipus*

And when I have that holy water, then?

*Chorus*

There are some bowls there, by a skillful potter;  
Put chaplets round the brims, over the handles.

*Oedipus*

Of myrtle springs, or woollen stuff, or what?

*Chorus*

Take the fleeces cropped from a young lamb.

475

*Oedipus*

Just so; then how must I perform the rite?

*Chorus*

Facing the quarter of the morning light,  
Pour your libations out.

*Oedipus*

Am I to pour them from the bowls you speak of?

*Chorus*

In three streams, yes; the last one, empty it.

*Oedipus*

With what should it be filled? Tell me this, too.

480

*Chorus*

With water and honey; but with no wine added.

*Oedipus*

And when the leaf-dark earth receives it?

*Chorus*

Lay three times nine young shoots of olive on it  
With both your hands; meanwhile repeat this prayer:

*Oedipus*

This I am eager to hear: it has great power.

485

*Chorus*

That as we call them Eumenides,  
Which means the gentle of heart,  
May they accept with gentleness  
The suppliant and his wish.

So you, or he who prays for you, address them;

But do not speak aloud or raise a cry;  
Then come away, and do not turn again.

490

If you will do all this, I shall take heart  
And stand up for you; otherwise, O stranger,  
I should be seriously afraid for you.

*Oedipus*

Children, you hear the words of these good people?

*Antigone*

Yes; now tell us what we ought to do.

*Oedipus*

It need not be performed by me; I'm far  
From having the strength or sight for it—I have neither.

495

Let one of you go and carry out the ritual,  
One soul, I think, often can make atonement  
For many others, if it be sincere.

Now do it quickly.—Yet do not leave me alone!  
I could not move without the help of someone.

500

*Ismene*

I'll go and do it. But where am I to go?  
Where shall I find the holy place, I wonder?

*Chorus*

On the other side of the wood, girl. If you need it, 505  
You may get help from the attendant there.

*Ismene*

I am going now. Antigone, you'll stay  
And care for father. Even if it were hard,  
I should not think it so, since it is for him.

*(Ismene goes out, right. The chorus draws nearer to Oedipus.)*

CHORAL DIALOGUE

*Chorus*

What evil things have slept since long ago 510  
It is not sweet to awaken;  
And yet I long to be told—

*Oedipus*

What?

*Chorus*

Of that heartbreak for which there was no help,  
The pain you have had to suffer.

*Oedipus*

For kindness' sake, do not open 515  
My old wound, and my shame.

*Chorus*

It is told everywhere, and never dies;  
I only want to hear it truly told.

*Oedipus*

Ah! Ah!

*Chorus*

Consent I beg you;  
Give me my wish, and I shall give you yours. 520

*Oedipus*

I had to face a thing most terrible,  
Not willed by me, I swear;  
I would have abhorred it all.

*Chorus*

So?

*Oedipus*

Though I did not know, Thebes married me to evil;  
Fate and I were joined there.

525

*Chorus*

Then it was indeed your mother  
With whom the thing was done?

*Oedipus*

Ah! It is worse than death to have to hear it!  
Strangers! Yes: and these two girls of mine . . .

530

*Chorus*

Go on—

*Oedipus*

These luckless two  
Were given birth by her who gave birth to me.

*Chorus*

These then are daughters; they are also—

*Oedipus*

Sisters: yes, their father's sisters . . .

535

*Chorus*

Ah, pity!

*Oedipus*

Pity, indeed. What throngs  
Of pities come into my mind!

*Chorus*

You suffered—

*Oedipus*

Yes, unspeakably.

*Chorus*

You sinned—

*Oedipus*

No, I did not sin!



*Chorus*

How not?

*Oedipus*

I thought

Of her as my reward. Ah, would I had never won it!

540

Would I had never served the State that day!

*Chorus*

Unhappy man—and you also killed—

*Oedipus*

What is it now? What are you after?

*Chorus*

Killed your father!

*Oedipus*

God in heaven!

You strike again where I am hurt.

*Chorus*

You killed him.

*Oedipus*

Killed him. Yet, there is—

545

*Chorus*

What more?

*Oedipus*

A just extenuation.

This:

I did not know him; and he wished to murder me.

Before the law—before God—I am innocent!

*(The Chorus turns at the approach of Theseus.)*

SCENE 3

*Chorus*

The king is coming! Aegeus' eldest son,

Theseus: news of you has brought him here.

550

*(Theseus enters with soldiers, left.)*

*Theseus*

In the old time I often heard men tell  
Of the bloody extinction of your eyes.  
Even if on my way I were not informed,  
I'd recognize you, son of Laius.  
The garments and the tortured face 555  
Make plain your identity. I am sorry for you.  
And I should like to know what favor here  
You hope for from the city and from me:  
Both you and your unfortunate companion.  
Tell me. It would be something dire indeed 560  
To make me leave you comfortless; for I  
Too was an exile I grew up abroad,  
And in strange lands I fought as few men have  
With danger and with death.  
Therefore no wanderer shall come, as you do, 565  
And be denied my audience or aid.  
I know I am only a man; I have no more  
To hope for in the end than you have.

*Oedipus*

Theseus, in those few words your nobility  
Is plain to me. I need not speak at length; 570  
You have named me and my father accurately,  
Spoken with knowledge of my land and exile.  
There is, then, nothing left for me to tell  
But my desire; and then the tale is ended.

*Theseus*

Tell me your wish, then; let me hear it now. 575

*Oedipus*

I come to give you something, and the gift  
Is my own beaten self: no feast for the eyes;  
Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty.

*Theseus*

What grace is this you say you bring to us?

*Oedipus*

In time you'll learn, but not immediately.

580

*Theseus*

How long, then, must we wait to be enlightened?

*Oedipus*

Until I am dead, and you have buried me.

*Theseus*

Your wish is burial? What of your life meanwhile?  
Have you forgotten that?—or do you care?

*Oedipus*

It is all implicated in my burial.

585

*Theseus*

But this is a brief favor you ask of me.

*Oedipus*

See to it, nevertheless! It is not simple.

*Theseus*

You mean I shall have trouble with your sons?

*Oedipus*

Those people want to take me back there now.

*Theseus*

Will you not go? Is exile admirable?

590

*Oedipus*

No. When I would have returned, they would not have it.

*Theseus*

What childishness! You are surely in no position—

*Oedipus*

When you know me, rebuke me; not till then!

*Theseus*

Well, tell me more. I must not speak in ignorance.

*Oedipus*

Theseus, I have been wounded more than once.

595

*Theseus*

Is it your family's curse that you refer to?

*Oedipus*

Not merely that; for all Greece buzzes with it.

*Theseus*

Then what is the wound that is so pitiless?

*Oedipus*

Think how it is with me. I was expelled  
From my own land by my own sons; and now,  
As a parricide, my return is not allowed.

600

*Theseus*

How can they summon you, if this is so?

*Oedipus*

The sacred oracle compels them to.

*Theseus*

They fear some punishment from his forebodings?

*Oedipus*

They fear they will be struck down in this land!

605

*Theseus*

And how could war arise between these nations?

*Oedipus*

Most gentle son of Aegeus! The immortal  
Gods alone have neither age nor death!  
All other things almighty Time disquiets.  
Earth wastes away; the body wastes away;  
Faith dies; distrust is born.

610

And imperceptibly the spirit changes  
Between a man and his friend, or between two cities  
For some men soon, for others in later time,  
Their pleasure sickens; or love comes again.  
And so with you and Thebes: the sweet season  
Holds between you now; but time goes on,  
Unmeasured Time, fathering numberless

615

Nights, unnumbered days: and on one day  
They'll break apart with spears this harmony— 620  
All for a trivial word.

And then my sleeping and long-hidden corpse,  
Cold in the earth, will drink hot blood of theirs,  
If Zeus endures; if his son's word is true . . .

However: there's no felicity in speaking  
Of hidden things. Let me come back to this. 625  
Be careful that you keep your word to me;  
For if you do you'll never say of Oedipus  
That he was given refuge uselessly—  
Or if you say it, then the gods have lied.

*Chorus*

My lord: before you came this man gave promise  
Of having power to make his words come true. 630

*Theseus*

Who would reject his friendship? Is he not  
One who would have, in any case, an ally's  
Right to our hospitality?  
Moreover he has asked grace of our deities,  
And offers no small favor in return. 635  
As I value that favor, I shall not refuse  
This man's desire; I declare him a citizen.

And if it should please our friend to remain here,  
I direct you to take care of him;  
Or else he may come with me.

Whatever you choose,  
Oedipus, we shall be happy to accord. 640  
You know your own needs best; I accede to them.

*Oedipus*

May God bless men like these!

*Theseus*

What do you say then? Shall it be my house?

*Oedipus*

If it were right for me. But the place is here . . .

*Theseus*

And what will you do here?—Not that I oppose you.

645

*Oedipus*

Here I shall prevail over those who banished me.

*Theseus*

Your presence, as you say, is a great blessing.

*Oedipus*

If you are firm in doing what you promise.

*Theseus*

You can be sure of me; I'll not betray you.

*Oedipus*

I'll not ask pledges, as I would of scoundrels.

650

*Theseus*

You'd get no more assurance than by my word.

*Oedipus*

I wonder how you will behave?

*Theseus*

You fear?

*Oedipus*

That men will come—

*Theseus*

These men will attend to them.

*Oedipus*

Look: when you leave me—

*Theseus*

I know what to do!

*Oedipus*

I am oppressed by fear!

*Theseus*

I feel no fear.

655

*Oedipus*

You do not know the menace!

*Theseus*

I do know

No man is going to take you against my will.

Angry men are liberal with threats

And bluster generally. When the mind

Is master of itself, threats are no matter. 660

These people may have dared to talk quite fiercely

Of taking you; perhaps, as I rather think,

They'll find a sea of troubles in the way.

Therefore I should advise you to take heart.

Even aside from me and my intentions,

Did not Apollo send and guide you here? 665

However it may be, I can assure you,

While I'm away, my name will be your shield.

*(Exit Theseus and soldiers. The Chorus turns to the audience.)*

# CHORAL POEM

*Chorus*

The land beloved of horsemen, fair

Colonus takes a guest;

He shall not seek another home, 670

For this, in all the earth and air,

Is most secure and loveliest.

In the god's untrodden vale

Where leaves and berries throng,

And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough,

The sweet, sojourning nightingale

Murmurs all day long. 675

No sun nor wind may enter there

Nor the winter's rain;

But ever through the shadow goes

Dionysus reveler,

Immortal maenads in his train. 680

Here with drops of heaven's dew  
At daybreak all the year,  
The clusters of narcissus bloom,  
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows  
Of those great ladies whom we fear. 685

The crocus like a little sun  
Blooms with its yellow ray;  
The river's fountains are awake,  
And his nomadic streams that run  
Unthinned forever, and never stay; 690

But like perpetual lovers move  
On the maternal land.  
And here the choiring Muses come,  
And the divinity of love  
With the gold reins in her hand.

*(The Chorus may now shift its grouping or otherwise  
indicate a change of theme.)*

*Chorus*

And our land has a thing unknown  
On Asia's sounding coast 695  
Or in the sea-surrounded west  
Where Agamemnon's race has sway:  
The olive, fertile and self-sown,  
The terror of our enemies  
That no hand tames nor tears away—  
The blessed tree that never dies!—  
But it will mock the swordsman in his rage.

Ah, how it flourishes in every field,  
Most beautifully here! 700  
The gray-leaved tree, the children's nourisher!  
No young man nor one partnered by his age  
Knows how to root it out nor make  
Barren its yield;  
For Zeus the Father smiles on it with sage



Eyes that forever are awake, 705  
And Pallas watches with her sea-pale eyes.

Last and grandest praise I sing  
To Athens, nurse of men,  
For her great pride and for the splendor  
Destiny has conferred on her 710  
Land from which fine horses spring!  
Land where foals are beautiful!  
Land of the sea and the sea-farer!  
Upon whose lovely littoral  
The god of the sea moves, the son of Time.

That lover of our land I praise again,  
Who found our horsemen fit  
For first bestowal of the curb and bit, 715  
To discipline the stallion in his prime,  
And strokes to which our oarsmen sing,  
Well-fitted, oak and men,  
Whose long sea-oars in wondrous rhyme  
Flash from the salt foam, following  
The hundred-footed sea-wind and the gull.

*(At the conclusion of this, Antigone is standing stage  
right, looking off-stage attentively.)*

SCENE 4

*Antigone*

Land so well spoken of and praised so much! 720  
Now is the time to show those words are true.

*Oedipus*

What now, my child?

*Antigone (returning to him)*

A man is coming towards us,  
And it is Creon—not unaccompanied, father.

*Oedipus*

Most kindly friends! I hope you may give proof,  
And soon, of your ability to protect me! 725

*Chorus*

Don't be afraid: you'll see. I may be old,  
But the nation's strength has not grown old.

*(Enter Creon, right, with guards )*

*Creon*

Gentlemen, and citizens of this land:  
I can see from your eyes that my arrival  
Has been a cause of sudden fear to you; 730  
Do not be fearful. And say nothing hostile!  
I have not come for any hostile action,  
For I am old, and know this city has  
Power, if any city in Hellas has.

But for this man here: I, despite my age, 735  
Am sent to bring him to the land of Thebes.  
This is not one man's mission, but was ordered  
By the whole Theban people. I am their emissary  
Because it fell to me as a relative  
To mourn his troubles more than anyone.

So, now, poor Oedipus, come home. 740  
You have heard my message. The people of the city  
Are right in summoning you—I most of all,  
For most of all, unless I am worst of men,  
I grieve for your unhappiness, old man.

I see you ravaged as you are, a stranger 745  
Everywhere, never at rest,

With only a girl to serve you in your need.—  
I never thought she'd fall to such indignity,  
Poor child! And yet she has; 750

Forever tending you, leading a beggar's  
Life with you; a grown-up girl who knows  
Nothing of marriage; whoever comes can take her. . . .

Is not this a disgrace? I weep to see it!  
Disgrace for you, for me, for all our people!  
We cannot hide what is so palpable, 755  
But you, if you will listen to me, Oedipus—

And in the name of your father's gods, listen!—  
Bury the whole thing now, agree with me  
To go back to your city and your home!

Take friendly leave of Athens, for she deserves it;  
But you should have more reverence for Thebes,  
Since long ago she was your kindly nurse

760

*Oedipus*

You brazen rascal! Playing your rascal's tricks  
In righteous speeches, as you always would!  
Why do you try it? How can you think to take me  
Into that snare I should so hate if taken?

That time when I was sick with my private  
Agony. when I would lightly have left the earth—  
You had no mind to give me what I wanted!  
But when at long last I had had my fill  
Of rage and grief, and in my quiet house  
Began to find some comfort: that was the time  
You chose to rout me out.

765

How precious was this kinship to you then?  
It is the same thing now: you see this city  
And all its people being kind to me,  
So you attempt to coax me away from them!  
A cruel thing, for all your soothing words.

770

What pleasure is there in being amiable  
To those who do not want your amiability?

775

Suppose that when you wanted something terribly  
A man should neither grant it you nor give  
Sympathy even; but later when you were glutted  
With all your heart's desire, should give it then,  
When charity was no charity at all?  
Would you not think the kindness somewhat hollow?  
That is the sort of kindness you offer me:  
Generous in words, but in reality evil.

780

Now I will tell these men, and prove you evil.  
 You come to take me, but not to take me home;  
 Rather to settle me outside the city  
 So that the city may escape my curse, 785  
 Escape from punishment by Athens.

Yes;

But you'll not have it. What you'll have is this:  
 My vengeance active in that land forever;  
 And what my sons will have of my old kingdom  
 Is just so much room as they need to die in! 790

Now who knows better the destiny of Thebes?  
 I do, for I have had the best informants—  
 Apollo, and Zeus himself who is his father.  
 And yet you come here with your fraudulent speech  
 All whetted up! The more you talk, the more 795  
 Harm, not good, you'll get by it!—  
 However, I know you'll never believe that.—

Only leave us! Let us live here in peace!  
 Is it a bad life, if it gives us pleasure?

*Creon*

Which of us do you consider is more injured 800  
 By talk like this? You hurt only yourself.

*Oedipus*

I am perfectly content, so long as you  
 Can neither wheedle me nor fool these others.

*Creon*

Unhappy man! Shall it be plain that time  
 Brings you no wisdom? that you shame your age? 805

*Oedipus*

What repartee! I know no honest man  
 Able to speak so well under all conditions!

*Creon*

To speak much is one thing; to speak to the point's another!

*Oedipus*

As if you spoke so little but so fittingly!

*Creon*

No, not fittingly for a mind like yours!

810

*Oedipus*

Go away! I speak for these men also!

Stop busybodying here where I must live!

*Creon*

I call on these—not you!—as witnesses

Of what rejoinder you have made to friends.—

If I ever take you—

*Oedipus*

With these men fighting for me,

Who is going to take me by violence?

815

*Creon*

You'll have pain enough without that, I promise you!

*Oedipus*

What are you up to? What is behind that brag?

*Creon*

Your two daughters: one of them I have just now

Had seized and carried off, and I'll take this one!

*Oedipus*

Ah!

*Creon*

You'll soon have better reason to groan about it!

820

*Oedipus*

You have my child?

*Creon*

And this one in a moment!

*Oedipus*

Ah, friends! What will you do? Will you betray me?

Are you not going to drive this thief away?

*Chorus*

Go, stranger! Off with you! You have no right  
To do what you are doing, or what you have done! 825

*Creon (to Guards)*

You there: it would be well to take her now,  
Whether she wants to go with you or not.

*(Two Guards approach Antigone.)*

*Antigone*

Oh, God, where shall I run? What help is there  
From gods or men?

*Chorus*

What are you doing, stranger?

*Creon*

I will not touch this man; only her who is mine. 830

*Oedipus*

O masters of this land!

*Chorus*

This is unjust!

*Creon*

No, just!

*Chorus*

Why so?

*Creon*

I take what belongs to me!

*Oedipus*

O Athens!

*(The Guards pinion Antigone's arms)*

*Chorus*

What are you doing, stranger? Will you  
Let her go? Must we have a test of strength? 835

*Creon*

Hold off!

*Chorus*

Not while you persist in doing this!

*Creon*

Your city will have war if you hurt me!

*Oedipus*

Did I not proclaim this?

*Chorus (to Guards)*

Take your hands

Off the child at once!

*Creon*

What you cannot enforce,

Do not command!

*Chorus*

I tell you, let go!

*Creon*

And I tell you—on your way!

840

(*The Guards pull Antigone toward the right*)

*Chorus*

Help! Here, men of Colonus! Help! Help!

The city, my city, is pillaged!

Hurry! Help, ho!

*Antigone*

They drag me away. How wretched! O friends, friends!

*Oedipus (groping)*

Where are you, child?

*Antigone*

They have overpowered me!

845

*Oedipus*

Give me your hands, little one!

*Antigone*

I cannot do it!

*Creon (to Guards)*

Will you get on with her?

(*They go out, right.*)

*Oedipus*

God help me now!

*Creon*

With these two sticks at any rate you'll never  
Guide yourself again! But since you wish  
To conquer your own people—by whose command, 850  
Though I am royal, I have performed this act—  
Go on and conquer! Later, I think, you'll learn  
That now as before you have done yourself no good  
By gratifying your temper against your friends!  
Anger has always been your greatest sin! 855

*Chorus (approaching Creon)*

Control yourself, stranger!

*Creon*

Don't touch me, I say!

*Chorus*

I'll not release you! Those two girls were stolen!

*Creon*

By God, I'll have more booty in a moment  
To bring my city! I'll not stop with them!

*Chorus*

Now what are you about?

*Creon*

I'll take him, too! 860

*Chorus*

A terrible thing to say!

*Creon*

It will be done!

*Chorus*

Not if the ruler of our land can help it!

*Oedipus*

Voice of shamelessness! Will you touch me?

*Creon*

Silence, I say!



*Oedipus*

No! May the powers here  
Not make me silent until I say this curse: 865  
You scoundrel, who have cruelly taken her  
Who served my naked eyepits as their eyes!  
On you and yours forever may the sun god,  
Watcher of all the world, confer such days  
As I have had, and such an age as mine! 870

*Creon*

Do you see this, citizens of this country?

*Oedipus*

They see both me and you; and they see also  
That when I am hurt I have only words to avenge it!

*Creon*

I'll not stand for it longer! Alone as I am,  
And slow with age, I'll try my strength to take him! 875

*(Creon goes slowly toward Oedipus.)*

*Oedipus*

Ah!

*Chorus*

You are a bold man, friend,  
If you think you can do this!

*Creon*

I do think so!

*Chorus*

If you could do it, our city would be finished!

*Creon*

In a just cause the weak will beat the strong! 880

*Oedipus*

You hear his talk?

*Chorus*

By Zeus, he shall not do it!

*Creon*

Zeus may determine that, but you will not.

*Chorus*

Is this not criminal!

*Creon (laying hold of Oedipus)*

If so, you'll bear it!

*Chorus*

Ho, everyone! Captains, ho!

Hurry up! Come on the run!

885

They are well on their way by now!

*(Theseus enters, left, with armed men)*

*Theseus*

Why do you shout? What is the matter here?

Of what are you afraid?

You have interrupted me as I was sacrificing

To the great god of the sea, Colonus's patron.

Tell me everything, so I may know;

I do not care to make such haste for nothing.

890

*Oedipus*

O dearest friend—I recognize your voice—

A despicable thing has just been done to me!

*Theseus*

What is it? Who is the man who did it? Tell me.

*Oedipus*

This Creon has had my daughters bound and stolen.

895

*Theseus*

What's that you say?

*Oedipus*

Yes; now you know my loss.

*Theseus (to his men)*

One of you go on the double

To the altar place and rouse the people there;

Make them leave the sacrifice at once

And run full speed, both foot and cavalry

As hard as they can gallop, for the place

900

Where the two highways come together.

The girls must not be permitted to pass there,  
Or I will be a laughing-stock to this fellow,  
As if I were a man to be handled roughly!  
Go on, do as I tell you! Quick!

(*Exit Soldier, left.*)

This fellow—

If I should act in anger, as he deserves, 905  
I wouldn't let him go without chastisement;  
But he shall be subject to the sort of laws  
He has himself imported here.—

(*To Creon*)

You: you shall never leave this land of Attica  
Until you produce those girls here in my presence; 910  
For your behavior is an affront to me,  
A shame to your own people and your nation.

You come to a city-state that practices justice,  
A state that rules by law, and by law only;  
And yet you cast aside her authority, 915  
Take what you please, and worse, by violence,  
As if you thought there were no men among us,  
Or only slaves; and as if I were nobody.

I doubt that Thebes is responsible for you:  
She has no propensity for breeding rascals. 920  
And Thebes would not applaud you if she knew  
You tried to trick me and to rob the gods  
By dragging helpless people from their sanctuary!

Were I a visitor in your country—  
No matter how immaculate my claims— 925  
Without consent from him who ruled the land,  
Whoever he might be, I'd take nothing.  
I think I have some notion of the conduct  
Proper to one who visits a friendly city.  
You bring disgrace upon an honorable  
Land—your own land, too; a long life 930  
Seems to have left you witless as you are old.

I said it once and say it now again:  
 Someone had better bring those girls here quickly,  
 Unless you wish to prolong your stay with us  
 Under close guard, and not much liking it. 935  
 This is not just a speech; I mean it, friend.

*Chorus*

Now do you see where you stand? Thebes is just,  
 But you are adjudged to have acted wickedly.

*Creon*

It was not that I thought this state unmanly,  
 Son of Aegeus; nor ill-governed, either; 940  
 Rather I did this thing in the opinion  
 That no one here would love my citizens  
 So tenderly as to keep them against my will . . .  
 And surely, I thought, no one would give welcome  
 To an unholy man, a parricide, 945  
 A man with whom his mother had been found<sup>1</sup>  
 Such at least was my estimate of the wisdom  
 Native to the Areopagus; I thought  
 Athens was not a home for such exiles.  
 In that belief I considered him my prize. 950  
 Even so, I'd not have touched him had he not  
 Called down curses on my race and me;  
 That was an injury that deserved reprisal.  
 There is no old age for a man's anger,  
 Only death; the dead cannot be hurt. 955  
 You'll do whatever you wish in this affair,  
 For even though my case is right and just,  
 I am weak, without support. Nevertheless,  
 Old as I am, I'll try to hold you answerable.

*Oedipus*

O arrogance unashamed! Whose age do you 960  
 Think you are insulting, mine or yours?  
 The bloody deaths, the incest, the calamities  
 You speak so glibly of: I suffered them,

By fate, against my will! It was God's pleasure,  
 And perhaps our race had angered him long ago 965  
 In me myself you could not find such evil  
 As would have made me sin against my own  
 And tell me this: if there were prophecies  
 Repeated by the oracles of the gods,  
 That father's death should come through his own son, 970  
 How could you justly blame it upon me?  
 On me, who was yet unborn, yet unconceived,  
 Not yet existent for my father and mother?  
 If then I came into the world—as I did come—  
 In wretchedness, and met my father in fight, 975  
 And knocked him down, not knowing that I killed him  
 Nor whom I killed—again, how could you find  
 Guilt in that unmeditated act?  
 As for my mother—damn you, you have no shame,  
 Though you are her own brother, in forcing me 980  
 To speak of that unspeakable marriage;  
 But I shall speak, I'll not be silent now  
 After you've let your foul talk go so far!  
 Yes, she gave me birth—incredible fate!—  
 But neither of us knew the truth; and she  
 Bore my children also—and then her shame.  
 But one thing I do know: you are content 985  
 To slander her as well as me for that;  
 While I would not have married her willingly  
 Nor willingly would I ever speak of it.  
 No: I shall not be judged an evil man,  
 Neither in that marriage nor in that death  
 Which you forever charge me with so bitterly.— 990  
 Just answer me one thing:  
 If someone tried to kill you here and now,  
 You righteous gentleman, what would you do,  
 Inquire first if the stranger was your father?  
 Or would you not first try to defend yourself?

I think that since you like to be alive 995  
 You'd treat him as the threat required; not  
 Look around for assurance that you were right.  
 Well, that was the sort of danger I was in,  
 Forced into it by the gods My father's soul,  
 Were it on earth, I know would bear me out.

You, however, being a knave—and since you 1000  
 Think it fair to say anything you choose,  
 And speak of what should not be spoken of—  
 Accuse me of all this before these people  
 You also think it clever to flatter Theseus,  
 And Athens—her exemplary government;

But in your flattery you have forgotten this: 1005  
 If any country comprehends the honors  
 Due to the gods, this country knows them best;  
 Yet you would steal me from Athens in my age  
 And in my time of prayer; indeed, you seized me,  
 And you have taken and carried off my daughters.

Now for that profanation I make my prayer, 1010  
 Calling on the divinities of the grove  
 That they shall give me aid and fight for me;  
 So you may know what men defend this town.

*Chorus*

My lord, our friend is worthy; he has had  
 Disastrous fortune; yet he deserves our comfort. 1015

*Theseus*

Enough of speeches. While the perpetrators  
 Flee, we who were injured loiter here.

*Creon*

What will you have me do?—since I am worthless.

*Theseus*

You lead us on the way. You can be my escort.  
 If you are holding the children in this neighborhood 1020  
 You yourself will uncover them to me.

If your retainers have taken them in flight,  
 The chase is not ours; others are after them.  
 And they will never have cause to thank their gods  
 For getting free out of this country.  
 All right. Move on And remember that the captor 1025  
 Is now the captive; the hunter is in the snare.  
 What was won by stealth will not be kept.  
 In this you'll not have others to assist you;  
 And I know well you had them, for you'd never  
 Dare to go so far in your insolence 1030  
 Were you without sufficient accomplices.  
 You must have had a reason for your confidence,  
 And I must reckon with it. The whole city  
 Must not seem overpowered by one man.  
 Do you understand at all? Or do you think  
 That what I say is still without importance? 1035

*Creon*

To what you say I make no objection here.  
 At home we, too, shall determine what to do.

*Theseus*

If you must threaten, do so on the way.  
 Oedipus, you stay here, and rest assured  
 That unless I perish first I'll not draw breath 1040  
 Until I put your children in your hands.

*Oedipus*

Bless you for your noble heart, Theseus!  
 And good luck to you in what you do for us!

*(Two Soldiers take Creon by the arms and march him out,  
 right, followed by Theseus and the rest of his men.  
 The Chorus follows a short way and stands  
 gazing after them.)*

CHORAL POEM

*Chorus*

Ah, God, to be where the pillagers make stand!  
 To hear the shout and brazen sound of war! 1045

Or maybe on Apollo's sacred strand,  
 Or by that torchlit Eleusinian shore  
 Where pilgrims come, whose lips the golden key  
 1050 Of sweet-voiced ministers has rendered still,  
 To cherish there with grave Persephone  
 Consummate rest from death and mortal ill;  
 For even to those shades the warrior king  
 1055 Will press the fighting on—until he take  
 The virgin sisters from the foemen's ring,  
 Within his country, for his country's sake!  
 It may be they will get beyond the plain  
 And reach the snowy mountain's western side,  
 1060 If their light chariots have the racing rein,  
 If they have ponies, and if they can ride;  
 Yet they'll be taken: for the god they fear  
 Fights for our land, and Theseus sends forth  
 1065 His breakneck cavalry with all its gear  
 Flashing like mountain lightning to the north.  
 These are the riders of Athens, conquered never;  
 They honor her whose glory all men know,  
 And honor the god of the sea, who loves forever  
 1070 The feminine earth that bore him long ago.

*(A shift of grouping, and the four following stanzas  
 taken each by a separate voice )*

*Chorus*

Has the fight begun? May it begin!  
 The presentiment enchants my mind  
 1075 That they shall soon give in!  
 And free the daughters of the blind  
 From hurt by their own kind!  
*For God will see some noble thing  
 Before this day is over.*  
 Forevisioning the fight, and proud,  
 1080 Would I could be a soaring dove



And circle the tall cloud;  
So might I gaze down from above  
On the mêlée I love.

*For God will see some noble thing  
Before this day is over.*

All highest of immortals! Hail,  
Great Zeus who see all things below!  
Let not our troopers fail;  
But give them luck to snare and throw  
And bring the quarry low!

1085

*And you shall see some noble thing  
Before this day is over.*

Stern Pallas, hear us! Apollo, hear!  
Hunter and sister who give chase  
To the swift and dappled deer:  
Be our protectors! Lend your grace  
To our land and our race!

1090

*And you shall see some noble thing  
Before this day is over.*

*(There is a long pause, and then the Chorus turns  
to Oedipus in joy.)*

SCENE 5

*Chorus*

O wanderer! You will not say I lied;  
I who kept lookout for you!  
I see them now—the two girls—here they come  
With our armed men around them!

*Oedipus*

Ah, where? Do you really mean it?

*(Theseus comes in leading by the hand Antigone and  
Ismene, followed by Soldiers.)*

*Antigone*

Father, father!

I wish some god would give you eyes to see  
The noble prince who brings us back to you!

1100

*Oedipus*

Ah, child! You are really here?

*Antigone*

Yes, for the strength

Of Theseus and his kind followers saved us.

*Oedipus*

Come to your father, child, and let me touch you  
Whom I had thought never to touch again!

1105

*Antigone*

It shall be as you ask; I wish it as much as you.

*Oedipus*

Where are you?

*Antigone*

We are coming to you together.

*Oedipus*

My sweet children!

*Antigone*

To our father, sweet indeed

*Oedipus*

My staff and my support!

*Antigone*

And partners in sorrow.

*Oedipus*

I have what is dearest to me in the world  
To die, now, would not be so terrible,  
Since you are near me.

1110

Press close to me, child,

Be rooted in your father's arms; rest now  
From the cruel separation, the going and coming;  
And tell me the story as briefly as you can:  
A little talk is enough for girls so tired.

1115

*Antigone*

Theseus saved us. he is the one to tell you;  
Neither you nor I had much to do with it!

*Oedipus*

Dear friend: don't be offended if I continue  
To talk to these two children overlong; 1120

I had scarce thought they would be seen again!

Be sure I understand that you alone

Made this joy possible for me

You are the one that saved them, no one else.

And may the gods give you such destiny

As I desire for you: and for your country. 1125

For I have found you truly reverent,

Decent, and straight in speech: you only

Of all mankind

I know it, and I thank you with these words.

All that I have I owe to your courtesy;—

Now give me your right hand, my lord,

And if it be permitted, let me kiss you . . . 1130

What am I saying? How can a wretch like me

Desire to touch a man who has no stain

Of evil in him? No, no; I will not do it,

And neither shall you touch me. The only ones 1135

Fit to be fellow sufferers of mine

Are those with such experience as I have.

Receive my salutation where you are.

And for the rest, be kindly to me still

As you have been up to now.

*Theseus*

That you should talk a long time to your children

In joy at seeing them—why, that's no wonder! 1140

Or that you should address them before me—

There's no offense in that. It is not in words

That I should wish my life to be distinguished,

But rather in things done.

Have I not shown that? I was not a liar  
 In what I swore I'd do for you, old man  
 I am here, and I have brought them back  
 Alive and safe, for all they were threatened with.  
 As to how I found them, how I took them, why  
 Brag of it? You will surely learn from them

1145

However, there is a matter that just now  
 Came to my attention on my way here—  
 A trivial thing to speak of, and yet puzzling;  
 I want your opinion on it.  
 It is best for a man not to neglect such things.

1150

*Oedipus*

What is it, son of Aegeus? Tell me,  
 So I may know on what you desire counsel.

1155

*Theseus*

They say some man is here who claims to be  
 A relative of yours, though not of Thebes,  
 For some reason he has thrown himself in prayer  
 Before Poseidon's altar, where I was making  
 Sacrifice before I came.

*Oedipus*

What is his country? What is he praying for?

1160

*Theseus*

All I know is this: he asks, they tell me,  
 A brief interview with you, and nothing more.

*Oedipus*

What about, I wonder?  
 It can't be a slight matter, if he is praying.

*Theseus*

They say he only asks to speak to you  
 And then to depart safely by the same road.

1165

*Oedipus*

Who could it be who would come here to pray?

*Theseus*

Think: have you any relative in Argos  
Who might desire this favor of you?

*Oedipus*

Dear friend!

Say no more!

*Theseus*

What is the matter with you?

*Oedipus*

No more!

*Theseus*

But, what is the matter? Tell me.

1170

*Oedipus*

When I heard "Argos" I knew the petitioner.

*Theseus*

And who is he whom I must prepare to dislike?

*Oedipus*

A son of mine, my lord, and a hated one  
Nothing could be more painful than to listen to him.

*Theseus*

But why? Is it not possible to listen  
Without doing anything you need not do?  
Why should it annoy you so to hear him?

1175

*Oedipus*

My lord, even his voice is hateful to me.  
Don't beat me down; don't make me yield in this!

*Theseus*

But now consider if you are not obliged  
To do so by his supplication here:  
Perhaps you have a duty to the god.

1180

*Antigone*

Father: listen to me, even if I am young.  
Allow this man to satisfy his conscience  
And give the gods whatever he thinks their due.  
And let our brother come here, for my sake.

Don't be afraid: he will not throw you off 1185  
 In your resolve, nor speak offensively.  
 What is the harm in hearing what he says?  
 If he has ill intentions, he'll betray them.  
 You sired him; even had he wronged you, father,  
 And wronged you impiously, still you could not 1190  
 Rightfully wrong him in return!  
 Do let him come!

Other men have bad sons,  
 And other men are swift to anger, yet  
 They will accept advice, they will be swayed  
 By their friends' pleading, even against their nature.  
 Reflect, not on the present, but on the past, 1195  
 Think of your mother's and your father's fate  
 And what you suffered through them! If you do,  
 I think you'll see how terrible an end  
 Terrible wrath may have.  
 You have, I think, a permanent reminder  
 In your lost, irrecoverable eyes. . . . 1200  
 Ah, yield to us! If our request is just,  
 We need not, surely, be importunate;  
 And you, to whom I have not yet been hard,  
 Should not be obdurate with me!

*Oedipus*

Child, your talk wins you a pleasure  
 That will be pain for me. If you have set 1205  
 Your heart on it, so be it.  
 Only, Theseus: if he is to come here,  
 Let no one have power over my life!

*Theseus*

That is the sort of thing I need hear only  
 Once, not twice, old man. I do not boast,  
 But you should know your life is safe while mine is. 1210

*(Theseus goes out, left, with his Soldiers, leaving two on guard. The Chorus turns to address the audience.)*

CHORAL POEM

*Chorus*

Though he has watched a decent age pass by, A man will sometimes still desire the world. I swear I see no wisdom in that man. The endless hours pile up a drift of pain More unrelieved each day; and as for pleasure,	1215
When he is sunken in excessive age, You will not see his pleasure anywhere The last attendant is the same for all, Old men and young alike, as in its season Man's heritage of underworld appears:	1220
There being then no epithalamion, No music and no dance. Death is the finish.	
Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. The second best is to have seen the light And then to go back quickly whence we came. The feathery follies of his youth once over,	1225
What trouble is beyond the range of man? What heavy burden will he not endure? Jealousy, faction, quarreling, and battle— The bloodiness of war, the grief of war.	1230
And in the end he comes to strengthless age, Abhorred by all men, without company, Unfriended in that uttermost twilight Where he must live with every bitter thing	1235
This is the truth, not for me only, But for this blind and ruined man. Think of some shore in the north the Concussive waves make stream	1240
This way and that in the gales of winter: It is like that with him: The wild wrack breaking over him From head to foot, and coming on forever; Now from the plunging down of the sun,	1245

« OEDIPUS AT COLONUS »

Now from the sunrise quarter,  
Now from where the noonday gleams,  
Now from the night and the north.

*(Antigone and Ismene have been looking off-stage, left.  
Antigone turns.)*

SCENE 6

*Antigone*

I think I see the stranger near us now,  
And no men with him, father; but his eyes  
Swollen with weeping as he comes. 1250

*(Polyneices enters, left.)*

*Oedipus*

Who comes?

*Antigone*

The one whom we have had so long in mind;  
It is he who stands here; it is Polyneices.

*Polyneices*

Ah, now what shall I do? Sisters, shall I  
Weep for my misfortunes or for those 1255  
I see in the old man, my father,  
Whom I have found here in an alien land,  
With you two girls, an outcast for so long,  
And with such garments! The abominable  
Filth grown old with him, rotting his sides!  
And on his sightless face the ragged hair 1260  
Streams in the wind. There's the same quality  
In the food he carries for his thin old belly.  
All this I learn too late.  
And I swear now that I have been villainous 1265  
In not supporting you! You need not wait  
To hear it said by others!

Only, think:

Compassion limits even the power of God;  
So may there be a limit for you, father!



For all that has gone wrong may still be healed,  
And surely the worst is over! 1270

Why are you silent?  
Speak to me, father! Don't turn away from me!  
Will you not answer me at all? Will you  
Send me away without a word?

Not even

Tell me why you are enraged against me?  
Daughters of Oedipus, my own sisters, 1275  
Try to move your so implacable father;  
Do not let him reject me in such contempt!  
Make him reply!

I am here on pilgrimage. . . .

*Antigone*

Poor brother: you yourself must tell him why. 1280  
As men speak on they may sometimes give pleasure,  
Sometimes annoy, or sometimes touch the heart;  
And so somehow provide the mute with voices.

*Polyneices*

I will speak out then; your advice is fair.  
First, however, I must claim the help 1285  
Of that same god, Poseidon, from whose altars  
The governor of this land has lifted me  
And sent me here, giving me leave to speak  
And to await response, and a safe passage.  
These are the favors I desire from you,  
Stranger, and from my sisters and my father. 1290  
And now, father, I will tell you why I came.  
I am a fugitive, driven from my country,  
Because I thought fit, as the eldest born,  
To take my seat upon your sovereign throne.  
For that, Eteocles, the younger of us, 1295  
Banished me—but not by a decision  
In argument or ability or arms;  
Merely because he won the city over.

Of this I believe the Furies that pursue you  
Were indeed the cause: and so I hear 1300  
From clairvoyants whom I afterwards consulted. . . .

Then, when I went into the Dorian land,  
I took Adrastus as my father-in-law,  
And bound to me by oath whatever men  
Were known as leaders or as fighters there;  
My purpose being to form an expedition  
Of seven troops of spearmen against Thebes — 1305  
With which enlistment may I die for justice  
Or else expel the men who exiled me!

So it is. Then why should I come here now?  
Father, my prayers must be made to you!  
Mine and those of all who fight with me! 1310

Their seven columns under seven captains  
Even now complete the encirclement of Thebes:  
Men like Amphiaraus, the hard spear thrower,  
Expert in spears and in the ways of eagles;  
Second is Tydeus, the Aetolian, 1315

Son of Oeneus; third is Eteoclus,  
Born in Argos; fourth is Hippomedon  
(His father, Talaus, sent him); Capaneus,  
The fifth, has sworn he'll raze the town of Thebes  
With fire-brands; and sixth is Parthenopaeus, 1320

An Arcadian who roused himself to war—  
Son of that virgin famous in the old time  
Who long years afterward conceived and bore him—  
Parthenopaeus, Atalanta's son  
And it is I, your son—or if I am not  
Truly your son, since evil fathered me,  
At least I am called your son—it is I who lead  
The fearless troops of Argos against Thebes. 1325

Now in the name of these two children, father,  
And for your own soul's sake, we all implore  
And beg you to give up your heavy wrath

Against me! I go forth to punish him,  
The brother who robbed me of my fatherland! 1330  
If we can put any trust in oracles,  
They say that those you bless shall come to power.

Now by the gods and fountains of our people,  
I pray you, listen and comply! Are we not beggars  
Both of us, and exiles, you and I? 1335  
We live by paying court to other men;  
The same fate follows us.  
But as for him—how insupportable!—  
He lords it in our house, luxuriates there,  
Laughs at us both!

If you will stand by me in my resolve,  
I'll waste no time or trouble whipping him; 1340  
And then I'll re-establish you at home,  
And settle there myself, and throw him out.  
If your will is the same as mine, it's possible  
To promise this. If not, I can't be saved. 1345

*Chorus*

For the sake of the one who sent him, Oedipus,  
Speak to this man before you send him back.

*Oedipus*

Yes, gentlemen: but were it not Theseus,  
The sovereign of your land, who sent him here, 1350  
Thinking it right that he should have an answer,  
You never would have heard a sound from me.

Well: he has asked, and he shall hear from me  
A kind of answer that will not overjoy him.  
You scoundrel!

When it was you who held  
Throne and authority—as your brother now 1355  
Holds them in Thebes—you drove me into exile:  
Me, your own father: made me a homeless man,  
Insuring me these rags you blubber over

When you behold them now—now that you, too,  
Have fallen on evil days and are in exile.

Weeping is no good now. However long  
My life may last, I have to see it through;  
But I regard you as a murderer!

For you reduced me to this misery,  
You made me an alien. Because of you  
I have begged my daily bread from other men.  
If I had not these children to sustain me,  
I might have lived or died for all your interest.  
But they have saved me, they are my support,  
And are not girls, but men, in faithfulness.  
As for you two, you are no sons of mine!

And so it is that there are eyes that watch you  
Even now; though not as they shall watch  
If those troops are in fact marching on Thebes.  
You cannot take that city. You'll go down  
All bloody, and your brother, too.

For I

Have placed that curse upon you before this,  
And now I invoke that curse to fight for me,  
That you may see a reason to respect  
Your parents, though your birth was as it was;  
And though I am blind, not to dishonor me.  
These girls did not.

And so your supplication and your throne  
Are overmastered surely,—if accepted  
Justice still has place in the laws of God.  
Now go! For I abominate and disown you!  
You utter scoundrel! Go with the malediction  
I here pronounce for you: that you shall never  
Master your native land by force of arms,  
Nor ever see your home again in Argos,  
The land below the hills; but you shall die  
By your own brother's hand, and you shall kill

The brother who banished you. For this I pray.  
 And I cry out to the hated underworld 1390  
 That it may take you home, cry out to those  
 Powers indwelling here; and to that Power  
 Of furious War that filled your hearts with hate!  
 Now you have heard me. Go: tell it to Thebes,  
 Tell all the Thebans; tell your faithful fighting  
 Friends what sort of honors 1395  
 Oedipus has divided among his sons!

*Chorus*

Polyneices, your coming here has given me  
 No joy at all. Now go away at once.

*Polyneices*

Ah, what a journey! What a failure!  
 My poor companions! See the finish now 1400  
 Of all we marched from Argos for! See me . . .  
 For I can neither speak of this to anyone  
 Among my friends, nor lead them back again;  
 I must go silently to meet this doom.  
 O sisters—daughters of his, sisters of mine! 1405  
 You heard the hard curse of our father:  
 For God's sweet sake, if father's curse comes true,  
 And if you find some way to return home,  
 Do not, at least, dishonor me in death!  
 But give me a grave and what will quiet me. 1410  
 Then you shall have, besides the praise he now  
 Gives you for serving him, an equal praise  
 For offices you shall have paid my ghost.

*Antigone*

Polyneices, I beseech you, listen to me!

*Polyneices*

Dearest—what is it? Tell me, Antigone. 1415

*Antigone*

Withdraw your troops to Argos as soon as you can.  
Do not go to your own death and your city's!

*Polyneices*

But that is impossible. How could I command  
That army, even backward, once I faltered?

*Antigone*

Now why, boy, must your anger rise again? 1420  
What is the good of laying waste your homeland?

*Polyneices*

It is shameful to run; and it is also shameful  
To be a laughing-stock to a younger brother.

*Antigone*

But see how you fulfill his prophecies!  
Did he not cry that you should kill each other? 1425

*Polyneices*

He wishes that. But I cannot give way

*Antigone*

Ah, I am desolate! But who will dare  
Go with you, after hearing the prophecies?

*Polyneices*

I'll not report this trifle. A good commander  
Tells what is encouraging, not what is not. 1430

*Antigone*

Then you have made up your mind to this, my brother?

*Polyneices*

Yes. And do not try to hold me back.  
The dark road is before me; I must take it,  
Doomed by my father and his avenging Furies.  
God bless you if you do what I have asked: 1435  
It is only in death that you can help me now.  
Now let me go. Good-bye! You will not ever  
Look in my eyes again.

*Antigone*

You break my heart!

*Polyneices*

Do not grieve for me.

*Antigone*

Who would not grieve for you,

Sweet brother! You go with open eyes to death!

1440

*Polyneices*

Death, if that must be.

*Antigone*

No! Do as I ask!

*Polyneices*

You ask the impossible.

*Antigone*

Then I am lost,

If I must be deprived of you!

*Polyneices*

All that

Rests with the powers that are over us,—

Whether it must be so or otherwise.

You two—I pray no evil comes to you,

1445

For all men know you merit no more pain.

*(Polyneices goes out, left. There is a dead silence;  
then the Chorus meditates )*

CHORAL POEM AND DIALOGUE

*Chorus*

So in this new event we see

New forms of terror working through the blind,

Or else inscrutable destiny.

1450

I am not one to say "This is in vain"

Of anything allotted to mankind.

Though some must fall, or fall to rise again,

Time watches all things steadily—

1455

*(A terrific peal of thunder.)*

Ah, Zeus! Heaven's height has cracked!

*Oedipus*

*Antigone*

Father, what is your reason for calling him?

*Oedipus*

God's beating thunder, any moment now, 1460  
Will clap me underground: send for him quickly!

*(Thunder and lightning.)*

### Chorus

Hear it cascading down the air!  
The god-thrown, the gigantic, holy sound!  
Terror crawls to the tips of my hair!  
My heart shakes!

There the lightning flames again!

What heavenly marvel is it bringing 'round?

I fear it, for it never comes in vain,

But for man's luck or his despair. . . . 1470

(Another terrific peal.)

Ah, Zeus! Majestic heaven!

*Oedipus*

My children, the appointed end has come;  
I can no longer turn away from it.

*Antigone*

How do you know? What is the sign that tells you?

*Oedipus*

I know it clearly now. Let someone quickly  
Send for the king and bring him here to me!

(Thunder and lightning.)

### Chorus

Hear the wild thunder fall!  
Towering Nature is transfixed!



Be merciful, great spirit, if you run 1480  
 This sword of darkness through our mother land;  
 Come not for our confusion,  
 And deal no blows to me,  
 Though your tireless Furies stand  
 By him whom I have looked upon  
 Great Zeus, I make my prayer to thee! 1485

*Oedipus*

Is the king near by? Will he come in time  
 To find me still alive, my mind still clear?

*Antigone*

Tell me what it is you have in mind!

*Oedipus*

To give him now, in return for his great kindness,  
 The blessing that I promised I would give.

(*Thunder.*)

1490

*Chorus*

O noble son, return!  
 No matter if you still descend  
 In the deep fastness of the sea god's grove,  
 To make pure offering at his altar fire:  
 Come back quickly, for God's love! 1495  
 Receive from this strange man  
 Whatever may be his heart's desire  
 That you and I and Athens are worthy of.  
 My lord, come quickly as you can!

(*The thunder continues, until it stops abruptly with  
 the entrance of Theseus, left.*)

SCENE 7

*Theseus*

Now why do you all together  
 Set up this shout once more?  
 I see it comes from you, as from our friend.  
 Is it a lightning bolt from God? a squall

1500

Of rattling hail? Those are familiar things  
When such a tempest rages over heaven.

*Oedipus*

My lord, I longed for you to come! This is  
God's work, your lucky coming. 1505

*Theseus*

Now, what new  
Circumstance has arisen, son of Laius?

*Oedipus*

My life sinks in the scale: I would not die  
Without fulfilling what I promised Athens.

*Theseus*

What proof have you that your hour has come? 1510

*Oedipus*

The great, incessant thunder and continuous  
Flashes of lightning from the hand of God. 1515

*Theseus*

I believe you. I have seen you prophesy  
Many things, none falsely. What must be done?

*Oedipus*

I shall disclose to you, O son of Aegeus,  
What is appointed for you and for your city:  
A thing that age will never wear away.  
Presently now, without a soul to guide me, 1520  
I'll lead you to the place where I must die;  
But you must never tell it to any man,  
Not even the neighborhood in which it lies.  
If you obey, this will count more for you  
Than many shields and many neighbors' spears. 1525  
These things are mysteries, not to be explained;  
But you will understand when you come there  
Alone. Alone, because I cannot disclose it  
To any of your men or to my children,  
Much as I love and cherish them. But you

Keep it secret always, and when you come  
To the end of life, then you must hand it on  
To your most cherished son, and he in turn  
Must teach it to his heir, and so forever.  
That way you shall forever hold this city  
Safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons.

For every nation that lives peaceably,  
There will be many others to grow hard  
And push their arrogance to extremes: the gods  
Attend to these things slowly But they attend  
To those who put off God and turn to madness!  
You have no mind for that, child of Aegeus;  
Indeed, you know already all that I teach.

Let us proceed then to that place  
And hesitate no longer; I am driven  
By an insistent voice that comes from God.  
Children, follow me this way. see, now,  
I have become your guide, as you were mine!  
Come: do not touch me: let me alone discover  
The holy and funereal ground where I  
Must take this fated earth to be my shroud  
This way, O come! The angel of the dead,  
Hermes, and veiled Persephone lead me on!

*(He leads them, firmly and slowly, to the left)*

O sunlight of no light! Once you were mine!  
This is the last my flesh will feel of you;  
For now I go to shade my ending day  
In the dark underworld. Most cherished friend!  
I pray that you and this your land and all  
Your people may be blessed: remember me,  
Be mindful of my death, and be  
Fortunate in all the time to come!

*(Oedipus goes out, followed by his children and by Theseus  
with his Soldiers. The Chorus lifts its arms to pray.)*

« OEDIPUS AT COLONUS »

CHORAL POEM

*Chorus*

If I may dare to adore that Lady  
The living never see,  
And pray to the master of spirits plunged in night,  
Who of vast Hell has sovereignty;  
Let not our friend go down in grief and weariness 1560  
To that all-shrouding cold,  
The dead men's plain, the house that has no light.  
Because his sufferings were great, unmerited and untold, 1565  
Let some just god relieve him from distress!  
  
O powers under the earth, and tameless  
Beast in the passage way, 1570  
Rumbler prone at the gate of the strange hosts,  
Their guard forever, the legends say:  
I pray you, even Death, offspring of Earth and Hell,  
To let the descent be clear 1575  
As Oedipus goes down among the ghosts  
On those dim fields of underground that all men living fear.  
Eternal sleep, let Oedipus sleep well!

*(A long pause. A Messenger comes in, left.)*

SCENE 8

*Messenger*

Citizens, the briefest way to tell you  
Would be to say that Oedipus is no more; 1580  
But what has happened cannot be told so simply—  
It was no simple thing.

*Chorus*

He is gone, poor man?

*Messenger*

You may be sure that he has left this world.

*Chorus*

By God's mercy, was his death a painless one? 1585

*Messenger*

That is the thing that seems so marvelous  
 You know, for you were witnesses, how he  
 Left this place with no friend leading him,  
 Acting, himself, as guide for all of us.  
 Well, when he came to the steep place in the road, 1590  
 The embankment there, secured with steps of brass,  
 He stopped in one of the many branching paths.

This was not far from the stone bowl that marks  
 Theseus' and Pirithous' covenant.

Half-way between that place of stone  
 With its hollow pear tree, and the marble tomb, 1595  
 He sat down and undid his filthy garments;  
 Then he called his daughters and commanded  
 That they should bring him water from a fountain  
 For bathing and libation to the dead  
 From there they could see the hill of Demeter, 1600  
 Freshener of all things: so they ascended it  
 And soon came back with water for their father;  
 Then helped him properly to bathe and dress.

When everything was finished to his pleasure,  
 And no command of his remained undone, 1605  
 Then the earth groaned with thunder from the god below;  
 And as they heard the sound, the girls shuddered,  
 And dropped to their father's knees, and began wailing,  
 Beating their breasts and weeping as if heartbroken.  
 And hearing them cry out so bitterly, 1610  
 He put his arms around them, and said to them:

"Children, this day your father is gone from you.  
 All that was mine is gone. You shall no longer  
 Bear the burden of taking care of me—  
 I know it was hard, my children.—And yet one word 1615  
 Makes all those difficulties disappear:  
 That word is love. You never shall have more

From any man than you have had from me.  
And now you must spend the rest of life without me."

That was the way of it. They clung together  
And wept, all three. But when they finally stopped,  
And no more sobs were heard, then there was  
Silence, and in the silence suddenly

A voice cried out to him—of such a kind  
It made our hair stand up in panic fear:

Again and again the call came from the god:  
"Oedipus! Oedipus! Why are we waiting?  
You delay too long; you delay too long to go!"

Then, knowing himself summoned by the spirit,  
He asked that the lord Theseus come to him;

And when he had come, said: "O beloved one,  
Give your right hand now as a binding pledge  
To my two daughters; children, give him your hands.  
Promise that you will never willingly  
Betray them, but will carry out in kindness  
Whatever is best for them in the days to come."

And Theseus swore to do it for his friend,  
With such restraint as fits a noble king  
And when he had done so, Oedipus at once  
Laid his blind hands upon his daughters, saying:  
"Children, you must show your nobility,  
And have the courage now to leave this spot.  
You must not wish to see what is forbidden,  
Or hear what may not afterward be told.  
But go—go quickly. Only the lord Theseus  
May stay to see the thing that now begins."

This much every one of us heard him say,  
And then we came away with the sobbing girls.  
But after a little while as we withdrew  
We turned around—and nowhere saw that man,  
But only the king, his hands before his face,

Shading his eyes as if from something awful,  
 Fearful and unendurable to see.  
 Then very quickly we saw him do reverence  
 To Earth and to the powers of the air,  
 With one address to both.

But in what manner 1655

Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men  
 Could tell but Theseus. It was not lightning,  
 Bearing its fire from God, that took him off;  
 No hurricane was blowing. 1660

But some attendant from the train of Heaven  
 Came for him; or else the underworld  
 Opened in love the unlit door of earth.  
 For he was taken without lamentation,  
 Illness or suffering, indeed his end  
 Was wonderful if mortal's ever was. 1665

Should someone think I speak intemperately,  
 I make no apology to him who thinks so.

*Chorus*

But where are his children and the others with them?

*Messenger*

They are not far away; the sound of weeping  
 Should tell you now that they are coming here.

(*Antigone and Ismene enter together.*)

#### CHORAL DIALOGUE

*Antigone*

Now we may weep, indeed. 1670

Now, if ever, we may cry  
 In bitter grief against our fate,  
 Our heritage still unappeased.  
 In other days we stood up under it,  
 Endured it for his sake,  
 The unrelenting horror. Now the finish 1675  
 Comes, and we know only

In all that we have seen and done  
Bewildering mystery.

*Chorus*

What happened?

*Antigone*

We can only guess, my friends.

*Chorus*

He has gone?

*Antigone*

He has; as one could wish him to.

Why not? It was not war  
Nor the deep sea that overtook him, 1680  
But something invisible and strange  
Caught him up—or down—  
Into a space unseen.  
But we are lost. A deathly  
Night is ahead of us.  
For how, in some far country wandering, 1685  
Or on the lifting seas,  
Shall we eke out our lives?

*Ismene*

I cannot guess. But as for me  
I wish that charnel Hell would take me 1690  
In one death with our father.  
This is such desolation  
I cannot go on living.

*Chorus*

Most admirable sisters:  
Whatever God has brought about  
Is to be borne with courage.  
You must not feed the flames of grief. 1695  
No blame can come to you.

*Antigone*

One may long for the past  
Though at the time indeed it seemed



Nothing but wretchedness and evil.  
Life was not sweet, yet I found it so  
When I could put my arms around my father  
O father! O my dear!  
Now you are shrouded in eternal darkness,  
Even in that absence  
You shall not lack our love,  
Mine and my sister's love.

1700

*Chorus*

He lived his life.

*Antigone*

He did as he had wished!

*Chorus*

What do you mean?

*Antigone*

In this land among strangers

1705

He died where he chose to die  
He has his eternal bed well shaded,  
And in his death is not unmourned.

My eyes are blind with tears  
From crying for you, father.

1710

The terror and the loss  
Cannot be quieted.

I know you wished to die in a strange country,  
Yet your death was so lonely!  
Why could I not be with you?

*Ismene*

O pity! What is left for me?  
What destiny awaits us both  
Now we have lost our father?

1715

*Chorus*

Dear children, remember  
That his last hour was free and blessed.  
So make an end of grieving!

1720

Is anyone in all the world  
Safe from unhappiness?

*Antigone*

Let us run back there!

*Ismene*

Why, what shall we do?

*Antigone*

I am carried away with longing—

*Ismene*

For what,—tell me!

1725

*Antigone*

To see the resting place in the earth—

*Ismene*

Of whom?

*Antigone*

Oh, father's! O dear God, I am so unhappy!

*Ismene*

But that is not permitted. Do you not see?

*Antigone*

Do not rebuke me!

*Ismene*

—And remember, too—

1730

*Antigone*

Oh, what?

*Ismene*

He had no tomb, there was no one near!

*Antigone*

Take me there and you can kill me, too!

*Ismene*

Ah! I am truly lost!

Helpless and so forsaken!

1735

Where shall I go and how shall I live?

*Chorus*

Don't be afraid, now.

*Antigone*

Yes, but where is a refuge?

*Chorus*

A refuge has been found—

*Antigone*

Where do you mean?

*Chorus*

A place where you will be unharmed!

*Antigone*

No . . .

1740

*Chorus*

What are you thinking?

*Antigone*

I think there is no way

For me to get home again.

*Chorus*

Do not go home!

*Antigone*

My home is in trouble.

*Chorus*

So it has been before.

*Antigone*

There was no help for it then: but now it is worse.

1745

*Chorus*

A wide and desolate world it is for you.

*Antigone*

Great God! What way is there?

Do the powers that rule our lives

Still press me on to hope at all?

1750

(*Theseus comes in, with attendants*)

*Theseus*

Mourn no more, children. Those to whom

The night of earth gives benediction

Should not be mourned. Retribution comes.

*Antigone*

Theseus: we fall on our knees to you!

*Theseus*

What is it that you desire, children?

1755

*Antigone*

We wish to see the place ourselves  
In which our father rests.

*Theseus*

No, no.

It is not permissible to go there.

*Antigone*

My lord and ruler of Athens, why?

*Theseus*

Because your father told me, children,  
That no one should go near the spot,  
No mortal man should tell of it,  
Since it is holy, and is his.

1760

And if I kept this pledge, he said,  
I should preserve my land from its enemies.  
I swore I would, and the god heard me:  
The oathkeeper who keeps track of all.

1765

*Antigone*

If this was our father's cherished wish,  
We must be satisfied.  
Send us back, then, to ancient Thebes,  
And we may stop the bloody war  
From coming between our brothers!

1770

*Theseus*

I will do that, and whatever else  
I am able to do for your happiness,  
For his sake who has gone just now  
Beneath the earth. I must not fail.

1775

*Chorus*

Now let the weeping cease;  
Let no one mourn again.  
These things are in the hands of God.



# ANTIGONE

*Translated by*

*ELIZABETH WYCKOFF*



## CHARACTERS

*Antigone*

*Ismene*

*Chorus of Theban Elders*

*Creon*

*A Guard*

*Haemon*

*Teiresias*

*A Messenger*

*Eurydice*

## ANTIGONE

SCENE: *Thebes, before the royal palace. Antigone and Ismene emerge from its great central door.*

*Antigone*

My sister, my Ismene, do you know  
of any suffering from our father sprung  
that Zeus does not achieve for us survivors?  
There's nothing grievous, nothing free from doom,  
not shameful, not dishonored, I've not seen.  
Your sufferings and mine.  
And now, what of this edict which they say  
the commander has proclaimed to the whole people?  
Have you heard anything? Or don't you know  
that the foes' trouble comes upon our friends?

10

*Ismene*

I've heard no word, Antigone, of our friends.  
Not sweet nor bitter, since that single moment  
when we two lost two brothers  
who died on one day by a double blow.  
And since the Argive army went away  
this very night, I have no further news  
of fortune or disaster for myself.

*Antigone*

I knew it well, and brought you from the house  
for just this reason, that you alone may hear.

*Ismene*

What is it? Clearly some news has clouded you.

20

*Antigone*

It has indeed. Creon will give the one  
of our two brothers honor in the tomb;  
the other none.



socles, with just entreatment treated,  
 law provides he has hidden under earth  
 have full honor with the dead below.  
 it Polyneices' corpse who died in pain,  
 ay say he has proclaimed to the whole town  
 t none may bury him and none bewail,  
 leave him unwept, untombed, a rich sweet sight  
 the hungry birds' beholding.

30

ch orders they say the worthy Creon gives  
 you and me—yes, yes, I say to *me*—  
 that he's coming to proclaim it clear  
 those who know it not.

rther: he has the matter so at heart  
 at anyone who dares attempt the act  
 ill die by public stoning in the town.

there you have it and you soon will show  
 you are noble, or fallen from your descent.

*te*

things have reached this stage, what can I do,  
 or sister, that will help to make or mend?

40

*gone*

hink will you share my labor and my act.

*ne*

What will you risk? And where is your intent?

*gone*

Will you take up that corpse along with me?

*ne*

'o bury him you mean, when it's forbidden?

*gone*

My brother, and yours, though you may wish he were not.  
 never shall be found to be his traitor.

hard of mind! When Creon spoke against it!

*Antigone*

It's not for him to keep me from my own.

*Ismene*

Alas. Remember, sister, how our father  
perished abhorred, ill-famed.

50

Himself with his own hand, through his own curse  
destroyed both eyes.

Remember next his mother and his wife  
finishing life in the shame of the twisted strings.

And third two brothers on a single day,  
poor creatures, murdering, a common doom  
each with his arm accomplished on the other.

And now look at the two of us alone.

We'll perish terribly if we force law  
and try to cross the royal vote and power.

60

We must remember that we two are women  
so not to fight with men.

And that since we are subject to strong power  
we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse.

So I shall ask of them beneath the earth  
forgiveness, for in these things I am forced,  
and shall obey the men in power. I know  
that wild and futile action makes no sense.

*Antigone*

I wouldn't urge it. And if now you wished  
to act, you wouldn't please me as a partner.

70

Be what you want to; but that man shall I  
bury. For me, the doer, death is best.

Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend,  
when I have dared the crime of piety.

Longer the time in which to please the dead  
than that for those up here.

There shall I lie forever. You may see fit  
to keep from honor what the gods have honored.

*Ismene*

I shall do no dishonor. But to act  
against the citizens. I cannot.

*Antigone*

That's your protection. Now I go, to pile  
the burial-mound for him, my dearest brother.

80

*Ismene*

Oh my poor sister. How I fear for you!

*Antigone*

For me, don't borrow trouble. Clear your fate.

*Ismene*

At least give no one warning of this act;  
you keep it hidden, and I'll do the same

*Antigone*

Dear God! Denounce me. I shall hate you more  
if silent, not proclaiming this to all.

*Ismene*

You have a hot mind over chilly things.

*Antigone*

I know I please those whom I most should please.

*Ismene*

If but you can. You crave what can't be done.

90

*Antigone*

And so, when strength runs out, I shall give over.

*Ismene*

Wrong from the start, to chase what cannot be.

*Antigone*

If that's your saying, I shall hate you first,  
and next the dead will hate you in all justice.  
But let me and my own ill-counselling  
suffer this terror. I shall suffer nothing  
as great as dying with a lack of grace.

*Ismene*

Go, since you want to. But know this: you go  
senseless indeed, but loved by those who love you.

*(Ismene returns to the palace; Antigone leaves by one of the side  
entrances. The Chorus now enters from the other side.)*

*Chorus*

Sun's own radiance, fairest light ever shone on the gates of  
Thebes,  
then did you shine, O golden day's  
eye, coming over Dirce's stream,  
on the Man who had come from Argos with all his armor  
running now in headlong fear as you shook his bridle free.

100

He was stirred by the dubious quarrel of Polyneices.  
So, screaming shrill,  
like an eagle over the land he flew,  
covered with white-snow wing,  
with many weapons,  
with horse-hair crested helms.

110

He who had stood above our halls, gaping about our seven gates,  
with that circle of thirsting spears  
Gone, without our blood in his jaws,  
before the torch took hold on our tower-crown.  
Rattle of war at his back; hard the fight for the dragon's foe.

120

The boasts of a proud tongue are for Zeus to hate.  
So seeing them streaming on  
in insolent clangor of gold,  
he struck with hurling fire him who rushed  
for the high wall's top,  
to cry conquest abroad.

130

Swinging, striking the earth he fell  
fire in hand, who in mad attack,  
had raged against us with blasts of hate.  
He failed. He failed of his aim.

For the rest great Ares dealt his blows about,  
first in the war-team.

140

The captains stationed at seven gates  
fought with seven and left behind  
their brazen arms as an offering  
to Zeus who is turner of battle.

All but those wretches, sons of one man,  
one mother's sons, who sent their spears  
each against each and found the share  
of a common death together.

Great-named Victory comes to us  
answering Thebe's warrior-joy.

Let us forget the wars just done  
and visit the shrines of the gods.

150

All, with night-long dance which Bacchus will lead,  
who shakes Thebe's acres.

*(Creon enters from the palace.)*

Now here he comes, the king of the land,  
Creon, Menoeceus' son,  
newly named by the gods' new fate.  
What plan that beats about his mind  
has made him call this council-session,  
sending his summons to all?

160

*Creon*

My friends, the very gods who shook the state  
with mighty surge have set it straight again  
So now I sent for you, chosen from all,  
first that I knew you constant in respect  
to Laius' royal power; and again  
when Oedipus had set the state to rights,  
and when he perished, you were faithful still  
in mind to the descendants of the dead.  
When they two perished by a double fate,  
on one day struck and striking and defiled  
each by his own hand, now it comes that I

170

hold all the power and the royal throne  
 through close connection with the perished men.  
 You cannot learn of any man the soul,  
 the mind, and the intent until he shows  
 his practise of the government and law.  
 For I believe that who controls the state  
 and does not hold to the best plans of all,  
 but locks his tongue up through some kind of fear,  
 that he is worst of all who are or were.  
 And he who counts another greater friend  
 than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere.  
 So I—may Zeus all-seeing always know it—  
 could not keep silent as disaster crept  
 upon the town, destroying hope of safety.  
 Nor could I count the enemy of the land  
 friend to myself, not I who know so well  
 that she it is who saves us, sailing straight,  
 and only so can we have friends at all.  
 With such good rules shall I enlarge our state.  
 And now I have proclaimed their brother-edict.  
 In the matter of the sons of Oedipus,  
 citizens, know: Eteocles who died,  
 defending this our town with champion spear,  
 is to be covered in the grave and granted  
 all holy rites we give the noble dead  
 But his brother Polyneices whom I name  
 the exile who came back and sought to burn  
 his fatherland, the gods who were his kin,  
 who tried to gorge on blood he shared, and lead  
 the rest of us as slaves—  
 it is announced that no one in this town  
 may give him burial or mourn for him.  
 Leave him unburied, leave his corpse disgraced,  
 a dinner for the birds and for the dogs.  
 Such is my mind. Never shall I, myself,  
 honor the wicked and reject the just.

180

190

200

The man who is well-minded to the state  
from me in death and life shall have his honor

210

*Chorus*

This resolution, Creon, is your own,  
in the matter of the traitor and the true  
For you can make such rulings as you will  
about the living and about the dead.

*Creon*

Now you be sentinels of the decree.

*Chorus*

Order some younger man to take this on.

*Creon*

Already there are watchers of the corpse.

*Chorus*

What other order would you give us, then?

*Creon*

Not to take sides with any who disobey.

*Chorus*

No fool is fool as far as loving death.

220

*Creon*

Death is the price But often we have known  
men to be ruined by the hope of profit.

*(Enter, from the side, a guard )*

*Guard*

Lord, I can't claim that I am out of breath  
from rushing here with light and hasty step,  
for I had many haltings in my thought  
making me double back upon my road.

My mind kept saying many things to me:

"Why go where you will surely pay the price?"

"Fool, are you halting? And if Creon learns  
from someone else, how shall you not be hurt?"

230

Turning this over, on I dilly-dallied.

And so a short trip turns itself to long.  
Finally, though, my coming here won out.  
If what I say is nothing, still I'll say it.  
For I come clutching to one single hope  
that I can't suffer what is not my fate

*Creon*

What is it that brings on this gloom of yours?

*Guard*

I want to tell you first about myself.  
I didn't do it, didn't see who did it.  
It isn't right for me to get in trouble

240

*Creon*

Your aim is good. You fence the fact around.  
It's clear you have some shocking news to tell

*Guard*

Terrible tidings make for long delays.

*Creon*

Speak out the story, and then get away

*Guard*

I'll tell you. Someone left the corpse just now,  
burial all accomplished, thirsty dust  
strewn on the flesh, the ritual complete.

*Creon*

What are you saying? What man has dared to do it?

*Guard*

I wouldn't know. There were no marks of picks,  
no grubbed-out earth. The ground was dry and hard,  
no trace of wheels. The doer left no sign.  
When the first fellow on the day-shift showed us,  
we all were sick with wonder  
For he was hidden, not inside a tomb,  
light dust upon him, enough to turn the curse,  
no wild beast's track, nor track of any hound

250



having been near, nor was the body torn.  
 We roared bad words about, guard against guard, 260  
 and came to blows. No one was there to stop us.  
 Each man had done it, nobody had done it  
 so as to prove it on him—we couldn't tell.  
 We were prepared to hold to red-hot iron,  
 to walk through fire, to swear before the gods  
 we hadn't done it, hadn't shared the plan,  
 when it was plotted or when it was done.  
 And last, when all our sleuthing came out nowhere,  
 one fellow spoke, who made our heads to droop  
 low toward the ground. We couldn't disagree. 270  
 We couldn't see a chance of getting off.  
 He said we had to tell you all about it.  
 We couldn't hide the fact.  
 So he won out. The lot chose poor old me  
 to win the prize. So here I am unwilling,  
 quite sure you people hardly want to see me.  
 Nobody likes the bringer of bad news.

*Chorus*

Lord, while he spoke, my mind kept on debating.  
 Isn't this action possibly a god's?

*Creon*

Stop now, before you fill me up with rage, 280  
 or you'll prove yourself insane as well as old.  
 Unbearable, your saying that the gods  
 take any kindly forethought for this corpse.  
 Would it be they had hidden him away,  
 honoring his good service, his who came  
 to burn their pillared temples and their wealth,  
 even their land, and break apart their laws?  
 Or have you seen them honor wicked men?  
 It isn't so.  
 No, from the first there were some men in town 290  
 who took the edict hard, and growled against me,

who hid the fact that they were rearing back,  
not rightly in the yoke, no way my friends.  
These are the people—oh it's clear to me—  
who have bribed these men and brought about the deed.  
No current custom among men as bad  
as silver currency. This destroys the state;  
this drives men from their homes; this wicked teacher  
drives solid citizens to acts of shame.

It shows men how to practise infamy  
and know the deeds of all unholiness. 300

Every least hireling who helped in this  
brought about then the sentence he shall have.

But further, as I still revere great Zeus,  
understand this, I tell you under oath,  
if you don't find the very man whose hands  
buried the corpse, bring him for me to see,  
not death alone shall be enough for you  
till living, hanging, you make clear the crime.

For any future grabbings you'll have learned  
where to get pay, and that it doesn't pay  
to squeeze a profit out of every source. 310

For you'll have felt that more men come to doom  
through dirty profits than are kept by them.

*Guard*

May I say something? Or just turn and go?

*Creon*

Aren't you aware your speech is most unwelcome?

*Guard*

Does it annoy your hearing or your mind?

*Creon*

Why are you out to allocate my pain?

*Guard*

The doer hurts your mind. I hurt your ears.

*Creon*

You are a quibbling rascal through and through.

320

*Guard*

But anyhow I never did the deed.

*Creon*

And you the man who sold your mind for money!

*Guard*

Oh!

How terrible to guess, and guess at lies!

*Creon*

Go pretty up your guesswork. If you don't  
show me the doers you will have to say  
that wicked payments work their own revenge.

*Guard*

Indeed, I pray he's found, but yes or no,  
taken or not as luck may settle it,  
you won't see me returning to this place.  
Saved when I neither hoped nor thought to be,  
I owe the gods a mighty debt of thanks.

330

*(Creon enters the palace. The Guard leaves by the way he came.)*

*Chorus*

Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.  
This thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,  
making his path through the roaring waves.  
And she, the greatest of gods, the earth—  
ageless she is, and unwearied—he wears her away  
as the ploughs go up and down from year to year  
and his mules turn up the soil.

340

Gay nations of birds he snares and leads,  
wild beast tribes and the salty brood of the sea,  
with the twisted mesh of his nets, this clever man.  
He controls with craft the beasts of the open air,  
walkers on hills The horse with his shaggy mane

350

he holds and harnesses, yoked about the neck,  
and the strong bull of the mountain.

Language, and thought like the wind  
and the feelings that make the town,  
he has taught himself, and shelter against the cold,  
refuge from rain. He can always help himself.  
He faces no future helpless. There's only death  
that he cannot find an escape from. He has contrived  
refuge from illnesses once beyond all cure. 360

Clever beyond all dreams  
the inventive craft that he has  
which may drive him one time or another to well or ill.  
When he honors the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right  
high indeed is his city; but stateless the man 370  
who dares to dwell with dishonor. Not by my fire,  
never to share my thoughts, who does these things.

*(The Guard enters with Antigone.)*

My mind is split at this awful sight.  
I know her. I cannot deny  
Antigone is here.  
Alas, the unhappy girl,  
her unhappy father's child. 380  
Oh what is the meaning of this?  
It cannot be you that they bring  
for breaking the royal law,  
caught in open shame.

*Guard*

This is the woman who has done the deed.  
We caught her at the burying. Where's the king?

*(Creon enters.)*

*Chorus*

Back from the house again just when he's needed.

*Creon*

What must I measure up to? What has happened?

*Guard*

Lord, one should never swear off anything.  
 Afterthought makes the first resolve a liar.  
 I could have vowed I wouldn't come back here  
 after your threats, after the storm I faced.  
 But joy that comes beyond the wildest hope  
 is bigger than all other pleasure known.  
 I'm here, though I swore not to be, and bring  
 this girl. We caught her burying the dead.  
 This time we didn't need to shake the lots;  
 mine was the luck, all mine.  
 So now, lord, take her, you, and question her  
 and prove her as you will. But I am free.  
 And I deserve full clearance on this charge.

390

400

*Creon*

Explain the circumstance of the arrest.

*Guard*

She was burying the man. You have it all.

*Creon*

Is this the truth? And do you grasp its meaning?

*Guard*

I saw her burying the very corpse  
 you had forbidden. Is this adequate?

*Creon*

How was she caught and taken in the act?

*Guard*

It was like this: when we got back again  
 struck with those dreadful threatenings of yours,  
 we swept away the dust that hid the corpse.  
 We stripped it back to slimy nakedness.  
 And then we sat to windward on the hill  
 so as to dodge the smell.  
 We poked each other up with growling threats  
 if anyone was careless of his work.

410

For some time this went on, till it was noon.  
The sun was high and hot. Then from the earth  
up rose a dusty whirlwind to the sky,  
filling the plain, smearing the forest-leaves,  
clogging the upper air. We shut our eyes,  
sat and endured the plague the gods had sent. 420  
So the storm left us after a long time.  
We saw the girl. She cried the sharp and shrill  
cry of a bitter bird which sees the nest  
bare where the young birds lay.  
So this same girl, seeing the body stripped,  
cried with great groanings, cried a dreadful curse  
upon the people who had done the deed.  
Soon in her hands she brought the thirsty dust,  
and holding high a pitcher of wrought bronze 430  
she poured the three libations for the dead.  
We saw this and surged down. We trapped her fast,  
and she was calm. We taxed her with the deeds  
both past and present. Nothing was denied.  
And I was glad, and yet I took it hard.  
One's own escape from trouble makes one glad;  
but bringing friends to trouble is hard grief.  
Still, I care less for all these second thoughts  
than for the fact that I myself am safe. 440

*Creon*

You there, whose head is drooping to the ground,  
do you admit this, or deny you did it?

*Antigone*

I say I did it and I don't deny it.

*Creon (to the guard)*

Take yourself off wherever you wish to go  
free of a heavy charge.

*Creon (to Antigone)*

You—tell me not at length but in a word.  
You knew the order not to do this thing?

*Antigone*

I knew, of course I knew. The word was plain.

*Creon*

And still you dared to overstep these laws?

*Antigone*

For me it was not Zeus who made that order.  
Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below  
mark out such laws to hold among mankind.

450

Nor did I think your orders were so strong  
that you, a mortal man, could over-run  
the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws.  
Not now, nor yesterday's, they always live,  
and no one knows their origin in time.

So not through fear of any man's proud spirit  
would I be likely to neglect these laws,  
draw on myself the gods' sure punishment.  
I knew that I must die; how could I not?  
even without your warning. If I die  
before my time, I say it is a gain.

460

Who lives in sorrows many as are mine  
how shall he not be glad to gain his death?  
And so, for me to meet this fate, no grief.  
But if I left that corpse, my mother's son,  
dead and unburied I'd have cause to grieve  
as now I grieve not.

And if you think my acts are foolishness  
the foolishness may be in a fool's eye.

470

*Chorus*

The girl is bitter. She's her father's child.  
She cannot yield to trouble; nor could he.

*Creon*

These rigid spirits are the first to fall.  
The strongest iron, hardened in the fire,  
most often ends in scraps and shatterings.

Small curbs bring raging horses back to terms.  
Slave to his neighbor, who can think of pride?  
This girl was expert in her insolence  
when she broke bounds beyond established law.  
Once she had done it, insolence the second,  
to boast her doing, and to laugh in it.  
I am no man and she the man instead  
if she can have this conquest without pain.  
She is my sister's child, but were she child  
of closer kin than any at my hearth,  
she and her sister should not so escape  
their death and doom. I charge Ismene too.  
She shared the planning of this burial  
Call her outside. I saw her in the house,  
maddened, no longer mistress of herself.  
The sly intent betrays itself sometimes  
before the secret plotters work their wrong.  
I hate it too when someone caught in crime  
then wants to make it seem a lovely thing

480

490

*Antigone*

Do you want more than my arrest and death?

*Creon*

No more than that. For that is all I need.

*Antigone*

Why are you waiting? Nothing that you say  
fits with my thought. I pray it never will.  
Nor will you ever like to hear my words.  
And yet what greater glory could I find  
than giving my own brother funeral?  
All these would say that they approved my act  
did fear not mute them.  
(A king is fortunate in many ways,  
and most, that he can act and speak at will.)

500

*Creon*

None of these others see the case this way.



*Antigone*

They see, and do not say. You have them cowed.

*Creon*

And you are not ashamed to think alone?

510

*Antigone*

No, I am not ashamed. When was it shame  
to serve the children of my mother's womb?

*Creon*

It was not your brother who died against him, then?

*Antigone*

Full brother, on both sides, my parents' child.

*Creon*

Your act of grace, in his regard, is crime.

*Antigone*

The corpse below would never say it was.

*Creon*

When you honor him and the criminal just alike?

*Antigone*

It was a brother, not a slave, who died.

*Creon*

Died to destroy this land the other guarded.

*Antigone*

Death yearns for equal law for all the dead.

*Creon*

Not that the good and bad draw equal shares.

520

*Antigone*

Who knows that this is holiness below?

*Creon*

Never the enemy, even in death, a friend.

*Antigone*

I cannot share in hatred, but in love.

*Creon*

Then go down there, if you must love, and love  
the dead. No woman rules me while I live.

*(Ismene is brought from the palace under guard.)*

*Chorus*

Look there! Ismene is coming out.  
She loves her sister and mourns,  
with clouded brow and bloodied cheeks,  
tears on her lovely face.

530

*Creon*

You, lurking like a viper in the house,  
who sucked me dry. I looked the other way  
while twin destruction planned against the throne.  
Now tell me, do you say you shared this deed?  
Or will you swear you didn't even know?

*Ismene*

I did the deed, if she agrees I did.  
I am accessory and share the blame.

*Antigone*

Justice will not allow this. You did not  
wish for a part, nor did I give you one.

*Ismene*

You are in trouble, and I'm not ashamed  
to sail beside you into suffering.

540

*Antigone*

Death and the dead, they know whose act it was.  
I cannot love a friend whose love is words.

*Ismene*

Sister, I pray, don't fence me out from honor,  
from death with you, and honor done the dead.

*Antigone*

Don't die along with me, nor make your own  
that which you did not do. My death's enough.

*Ismene*

When you are gone what life can be my friend?

*Antigone*

Love Creon. He's your kinsman and your care.

*Ismene*

Why hurt me, when it does yourself no good?

550

*Antigone*

I also suffer, when I laugh at you.

*Ismene*

What further service can I do you now?

*Antigone*

To save yourself. I shall not envy you.

*Ismene*

Alas for me. Am I outside your fate?

*Antigone*

Yes. For you chose to live when I chose death.

*Ismene*

At least I was not silent. You were warned.

*Antigone*

Some will have thought you wiser. Some will not.

*Ismene*

And yet the blame is equal for us both.

*Antigone*

Take heart. You live. My life died long ago.

And that has made me fit to help the dead.

560

*Creon*

One of these girls has shown her lack of sense  
just now. The other had it from her birth.

*Ismene*

Yes, lord. When people fall in deep distress  
their native sense departs, and will not stay.

*Creon*

You chose your mind's distraction when you chose  
to work out wickedness with this wicked girl.

*Ismene*

What life is there for me to live without her?

*Creon*

Don't speak of her. For she is here no more.

*Ismene*

But will you kill your own son's promised bride?

*Creon*

Oh, there are other furrows for his plough.

*Ismene*

But where the closeness that has bound these two?

570

*Creon*

Not for my sons will I choose wicked wives.

*Ismene*

Dear Haemon, your father robs you of your rights.

*Creon*

You and your marriage trouble me too much.

*Ismene*

You will take away his bride from your own son?

*Creon*

Yes. Death will help me break this marriage off.

*Chorus*

It seems determined that the girl must die.

*Creon*

You helped determine it. Now, no delay!  
Slaves, take them in. They must be women now.  
No more free running.  
Even the bold will fly when they see Death  
drawing in close enough to end their life.

580

(*Antigone and Ismene are taken inside.*)

*Chorus*

Fortunate they whose lives have no taste of pain.  
For those whose house is shaken by the gods  
escape no kind of doom. It extends to all the kin  
like the wave that comes when the winds of Thrace  
run over the dark of the sea.

The black sand of the bottom is brought from the depth; 590  
the beaten capes sound back with a hollow cry.

Ancient the sorrow of Labdacus' house, I know.  
Dead men's grief comes back, and falls on grief.  
No generation can free the next.

One of the gods will strike. There is no escape.  
So now the light goes out  
for the house of Oedipus, while the bloody knife 600  
cuts the remaining root. Folly and Fury have done this.

What madness of man, O Zeus, can bind your power?  
Not sleep can destroy it who ages all,  
nor the weariless months the gods have set. Unaged in time  
monarch you rule of Olympus' gleaming light. 610  
Near time, far future, and the past,  
one law controls them all:  
any greatness in human life brings doom.

Wandering hope brings help to many men.  
But others she tricks from their giddy loves,  
and her quarry knows nothing until he has walked into flame.  
Word of wisdom it was when someone said, 620  
"The bad becomes the good  
to him a god would doom."  
Only briefly is that one from under doom.

(*Haemon enters from the side.*)

Here is your one surviving son.  
Does he come in grief at the fate of his bride,  
in pain that he's tricked of his wedding? 630

*Creon*

Soon we shall know more than a seer could tell us.  
Son, have you heard the vote condemned your bride?  
And are you here, maddened against your father,  
or are we friends, whatever I may do?

*Haemon*

My father, I am yours You keep me straight  
with your good judgment, which I shall ever follow.  
Nor shall a marriage count for more with me  
than your kind leading.

*Creon*

There's my good boy. So should you hold at heart  
and stand behind your father all the way.

640

It is for this men pray they may beget  
households of dutiful obedient sons,  
who share alike in punishing enemies,  
and give due honor to their father's friends.

Whoever breeds a child that will not help  
what has he sown but trouble for himself,  
and for his enemies laughter full and free?

Son, do not let your lust mislead your mind,  
all for a woman's sake, for well you know

how cold the thing he takes into his arms  
who has a wicked woman for his wife.

650

What deeper wounding than a friend no friend?

Oh spit her forth forever, as your foe.

Let the girl marry somebody in Hades.

Since I have caught her in the open act,

the only one in town who disobeyed,

I shall not now proclaim myself a liar,

but kill her. Let her sing her song of Zeus

who guards the kindred.

If I allow disorder in my house

I'd surely have to licence it abroad.

660

A man who deals in fairness with his own,

he can make manifest justice in the state.  
 But he who crosses law, or forces it,  
 or hopes to bring the rulers under him,  
 shall never have a word of praise from me.  
 The man the state has put in place must have  
 obedient hearing to his least command  
 when it is right, and even when it's not.  
 He who accepts this teaching I can trust,  
 ruler, or ruled, to function in his place,  
 to stand his ground even in the storm of spears,  
 a mate to trust in battle at one's side.  
 There is no greater wrong than disobedience.  
 This ruins cities, this tears down our homes,  
 this breaks the battle-front in panic-rout.  
 If men live decently it is because  
 discipline saves their very lives for them.  
 So I must guard the men who yield to order,  
 not let myself be beaten by a woman.  
 Better, if it must happen, that a man  
 should overset me.  
 I won't be called weaker than womankind.

670

680

*Chorus*

We think—unless our age is cheating us—  
 that what you say is sensible and right.

*Haemon*

Father, the gods have given men good sense,  
 the only sure possession that we have.  
 I couldn't find the words in which to claim  
 that there was error in your late remarks.  
 Yet someone else might bring some further light.  
 Because I am your son I must keep watch  
 on all men's doing where it touches you,  
 their speech, and most of all, their discontents.  
 Your presence frightens any common man  
 from saying things you would not care to hear.

690

But in dark corners I have heard them say  
how the whole town is grieving for this girl,  
unjustly doomed, if ever woman was,  
to die in shame for glorious action done.  
She would not leave her fallen, slaughtered brother  
there, as he lay, unburied, for the birds  
and hungry dogs to make an end of him  
Isn't her real desert a golden prize?

This is the undercover speech in town.  
Father, your welfare is my greatest good.  
What loveliness in life for any child

700

outweighs a father's fortune and good fame?  
And so a father feels his children's faring.  
Then, do not have one mind, and one alone  
that only your opinion can be right  
Whoever thinks that he alone is wise,  
his eloquence, his mind, above the rest,  
come the unfolding, shows his emptiness  
A man, though wise, should never be ashamed  
of learning more, and must unbend his mind.  
Have you not seen the trees beside the torrent,  
the ones that bend them saving every leaf,  
while the resistant perish root and branch?  
And so the ship that will not slacken sail,  
the sheet drawn tight, unyielding, overturns.  
She ends the voyage with her keel on top  
No, yield your wrath, allow a change of stand.  
Young as I am, if I may give advice,  
I'd say it would be best if men were born  
perfect in wisdom, but that failing this  
(which often fails) it can be no dishonor  
to learn from others when they speak good sense.

710

720

*Chorus*

Lord, if your son has spoken to the point  
you should take his lesson. He should do the same  
Both sides have spoken well.



*Creon*

At my age I'm to school my mind by his?  
This boy instructor is my master, then?

*Haemon*

I urge no wrong. I'm young, but you should watch  
my actions, not my years, to judge of me.

*Creon*

A loyal action, to respect disorder?

730

*Haemon*

I wouldn't urge respect for wickedness.

*Creon*

You don't think she is sick with that disease?

*Haemon*

Your fellow-citizens maintain she's not.

*Creon*

Is the town to tell me how I ought to rule?

*Haemon*

Now there you speak just like a boy yourself.

*Creon*

Am I to rule by other mind than mine?

*Haemon*

No city is property of a single man.

*Creon*

But custom gives possession to the ruler.

*Haemon*

You'd rule a desert beautifully alone.

*Creon (to the Chorus)*

It seems he's firmly on the woman's side.

740

*Haemon*

If you're a woman. It is you I care for.

*Creon*

Wicked, to try conclusions with your father.

*Haemon*

When you conclude unjustly, so I must

*Creon*

Am I unjust, when I respect my office?

*Haemon*

You tread down the gods' due. Respect is gone.

*Creon*

Your mind is poisoned. Weaker than a woman!

*Haemon*

At least you'll never see me yield to shame.

*Creon*

Your whole long argument is but for her.

*Haemon*

And you, and me, and for the gods below.

*Creon*

You shall not marry her while she's alive.

750

*Haemon*

Then she shall die. Her death will bring another.

*Creon*

Your boldness has made progress. Threats, indeed!

*Haemon*

No threat, to speak against your empty plan.

*Creon*

Past due, sharp lessons for your empty brain.

*Haemon*

If you weren't father, I should call you mad.

*Creon*

Don't flatter me with "father," you woman's slave.

*Haemon*

You wish to speak but never wish to hear.

*Creon*

You think so? By Olympus, you shall not  
revile me with these tauntings and go free.

Bring out the hateful creature; she shall die  
full in his sight, close at her bridegroom's side.

760

*Haemon*

Not at my side her death, and you will not  
ever lay eyes upon my face again.  
Find other friends to rave with after this.

*(Haemon leaves, by one of the side entrances.)*

*Chorus*

Lord, he has gone with all the speed of rage.  
When such a man is grieved his mind is hard.

*Creon*

Oh, let him go, plan superhuman action.  
In any case the girls shall not escape.

*Chorus*

You plan for both the punishment of death?

770

*Creon*

Not her who did not do it. You are right.

*Chorus*

And what death have you chosen for the other?

*Creon*

To take her where the foot of man comes not.  
There shall I hide her in a hollowed cave  
living, and leave her just so much to eat  
as clears the city from the guilt of death.  
There, if she prays to Death, the only god  
of her respect, she may manage not to die.  
Or she may learn at last and even then  
how much too much her labor for the dead.

780

*(Creon returns to the palace.)*

*Chorus*

Love unconquered in fight, love who falls on our havings.  
You rest in the bloom of a girl's unwithered face.  
You cross the sea, you are known in the wildest lairs.

Not the immortal gods can fly,  
nor men of a day. Who has you within him is mad. 790

You twist the minds of the just. Wrong they pursue and are  
ruined.

You made this quarrel of kindred before us now.

Desire looks clear from the eyes of a lovely bride:

power as strong as the founded world.

For there is the goddess at play with whom no man can fight. 800

*(Antigone is brought from the palace under guard )*

Now I am carried beyond all bounds.

My tears will not be checked.

I see Antigone depart

to the chamber where all men sleep.

*Antigone*

Men of my fathers' land, you see me go

my last journey. My last sight of the sun,

then never again. Death who brings all to sleep 810

takes me alive to the shore

of the river underground.

Not for me was the marriage-hymn, nor will anyone start the

song

at a wedding of mine. Acheron is my mate.

*Chorus*

With praise as your portion you go

in fame to the vault of the dead.

Untouched by wasting disease,

not paying the price of the sword, 820

of your own motion you go.

Alone among mortals will you descend

in life to the house of Death.

*Antigone*

Pitiful was the death that stranger died,

our queen once, Tantalus' daughter. The rock

it covered her over, like stubborn ivy it grew.

Still, as she wastes, the rain  
and snow companion her.  
Pouring down from her mourning eyes comes the water that  
soaks the stone.

830

My own putting to sleep a god has planned like hers.

*Chorus*

God's child and god she was.  
We are born to death.  
Yet even in death you will have your fame,  
to have gone like a god to your fate,  
in living and dying alike.

*Antigone*

Laughter against me now. In the name of our fathers' gods,  
could you not wait till I went? Must affront be thrown in my  
face?

840

O city of wealthy men.  
I call upon Dirce's spring,  
I call upon Thebe's grove in the armored plain,  
to be my witnesses, how with no friend's mourning,  
by what decree I go to the fresh-made prison-tomb.  
Alive to the place of corpses, an alien still,  
never at home with the living nor with the dead.

850

*Chorus*

You went to the furthest verge  
of daring, but there you found  
the high foundation of justice, and fell.  
Perhaps you are paying your father's pain.

*Antigone*

You speak of my darkest thought, my pitiful father's fame,  
spread through all the world, and the doom that haunts our  
house,  
the royal house of Thebes.  
My mother's marriage-bed.  
Destruction where she lay with her husband-son,  
my father. These are my parents and I their child.

860

I go to stay with them. My curse is to die unwed.  
My brother, you found your fate when you found your bride, 870  
found it for me as well Dead, you destroy my life

*Chorus*

You showed respect for the dead  
So we for you. but power  
is not to be thwarted so  
Your self-sufficiency has brought you down

*Antigone*

Unwept, no wedding-song, unfriended, now I go  
the road laid down for me.  
No longer shall I see this holy light of the sun. 880  
No friend to bewail my fate.

*(Creon enters from the palace.)*

*Creon*

When people sing the dirge for their own deaths  
ahead of time, nothing will break them off  
if they can hope that this will buy delay.  
Take her away at once, and open up  
the tomb I spoke of Leave her there alone.  
There let her choose: death, or a buried life.  
No stain of guilt upon us in this case,  
but she is exiled from our life on earth. 890

*Antigone*

O tomb, O marriage-chamber, hollowed out  
house that will watch forever, where I go.  
To my own people, who are mostly there;  
Persephone has taken them to her.  
Last of them all, ill-fated past the rest,  
shall I descend, before my course is run.  
Still when I get there I may hope to find  
I come as a dear friend to my dear father,  
to you, my mother, and my brother too.  
All three of you have known my hand in death. 900  
I washed your bodies, dressed them for the grave,

poured out the last libation at the tomb.  
 Last, Polyneices knows the price I pay  
 for doing final service to his corpse.  
 And yet the wise will know my choice was right.  
 Had I had children or their father dead,  
 I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen  
 in such a case to cross the state's decree.  
 What is the law that lies behind these words?  
 One husband gone, I might have found another,  
 or a child from a new man in first child's place,  
 but with my parents hid away in death,  
 no brother, ever, could spring up for me.  
 Such was the law by which I honored you.  
 But Creon thought the doing was a crime,  
 a dreadful daring, brother of my heart.  
 So now he takes and leads me out by force.  
 No marriage-bed, no marriage-song for me,  
 and since no wedding, so no child to rear.  
 I go, without a friend, struck down by fate,  
 live to the hollow chambers of the dead.  
 What divine justice have I disobeyed?  
 Why, in my misery, look to the gods for help?  
 Can I call any of them my ally?  
 I stand convicted of impiety,  
 the evidence my pious duty done  
 Should the gods think that this is righteousness,  
 in suffering I'll see my error clear.  
 But if it is the others who are wrong  
 I wish them no greater punishment than mine.

910

920

*Chorus*

The same tempest of mind  
 as ever, controls the girl.

930

*Creon*

Therefore her guards shall regret  
 the slowness with which they move.

*Antigone*

That word comes close to death

*Creon*

You are perfectly right in that

*Antigone*

O town of my fathers in Thebe's land,

O gods of our house.

I am led away at last.

Look, leaders of Thebes,

I am last of your royal line.

Look what I suffer, at whose command,

because I respected the right

940

*(Antigone is led away. The slow procession should begin during  
the preceding passage.)*

*Chorus*

Danaë suffered too.

She went from the light to the brass-built room,  
chamber and tomb together. Like you, poor child,  
she was of great descent, and more, she held and kept  
the seed of the golden rain which was Zeus.

950

Fate has terrible power.

You cannot escape it by wealth or war.

No fort will keep it out, no ships outrun it

Remember the angry king,  
son of Dryas, who raged at the god and paid,  
pent in a rock-walled prison. His bursting wrath  
slowly went down. As the terror of madness went,  
he learned of his frenzied attack on the god.

960

Fool, he had tried to stop  
the dancing women possessed of god,  
the fire of Dionysus, the songs and flutes.

Where the dark rocks divide  
sea from sea in Thrace  
is Salmydessus whose savage god

970



beheld the terrible blinding wounds  
dealt to Phineus' sons by their father's wife.  
Dark the eyes that looked to avenge their mother.  
Sharp with her shuttle she struck, and blooded her hands.

Wasting they wept their fate,  
settled when they were born  
to Cleopatra, unhappy queen.

980

She was a princess too, of an ancient house,  
reared in the cave of the wild north wind, her father  
Half a goddess but, child, she suffered like you.

*(Enter, from the side Teiresias, the blind prophet,  
led by a boy attendant )*

*Teiresias*

Elders of Thebes, we two have come one road,  
two of us looking through one pair of eyes.  
This is the way of walking for the blind

990

*Creon*

Teiresias, what news has brought you here?

*Teiresias*

I'll tell you. You in turn must trust the prophet.

*Creon*

I've always been attentive to your counsel.

*Teiresias*

And therefore you have steered this city straight

*Creon*

So I can say how helpful you have been.

*Teiresias*

But now you are balanced on a razor's edge.

*Creon*

What is it? How I shudder at your words!

*Teiresias*

You'll know, when you hear the signs that I have marked  
I sat where every bird of heaven comes

1000

in my old place of augury, and heard  
bird-cries I'd never known They screeched about  
goaded by madness, inarticulate.  
I marked that they were tearing one another  
with claws of murder. I could hear the wing-beats.  
I was afraid, so straight away I tried  
burnt sacrifice upon the flaming altar.  
No fire caught my offerings. Slimy ooze  
dripped on the ashes, smoked and sputtered there.  
Gall burst its bladder, vanished into vapor;  
the fat dripped from the bones and would not burn.  
These are the omens of the rites that failed,  
as my boy here has told me. He's my guide  
as I am guide to others.

1010

Why has this sickness struck against the state?  
Through your decision.  
All of the altars of the town are choked  
with leavings of the dogs and birds; their feast  
was on that fated, fallen Polyneices  
So the gods will have no offering from us,  
not prayer, nor flame of sacrifice. The birds  
will not cry out a sound I can distinguish,  
gorged with the greasy blood of that dead man.  
Think of these things, my son. All men may err  
but error once committed, he's no fool  
nor yet unfortunate, who gives up his stiffness  
and cures the trouble he has fallen in.  
Stubbornness and stupidity are twins.  
Yield to the dead. Why goad him where he lies?  
What use to kill the dead a second time?  
I speak for your own good. And I am right.  
Learning from a wise counsellor is not pain  
if what he speaks are profitable words.

1020

1030

*Creon*

Old man, you all, like bowmen at a mark,  
have bent your bows at me. I've had my share

of seers. I've been an item in your accounts.  
Make profit, trade in Lydian silver-gold,  
pure gold of India; that's your chief desire.  
But you will never cover up that corpse.  
Not if the very eagles tear their food  
from him, and leave it at the throne of Zeus.  
I wouldn't give him up for burial  
in fear of that pollution. For I know  
no mortal being can pollute the gods.  
O old Teiresias, human beings fall;  
the clever ones the furthest, when they plead  
a shameful case so well in hope of profit.

1040

*Teiresias*

Alas!

What man can tell me, has he thought at all . . .

*Creon*

What hackneyed saw is coming from your lips?

*Teiresias*

How better than all wealth is sound good counsel.

1050

*Creon*

And so is folly worse than anything.

*Teiresias*

And you're infected with that same disease.

*Creon*

I'm reluctant to be uncivil to a seer . . .

*Teiresias*

You're that already. You have said I lie.

*Creon*

Well, the whole crew of seers are money-mad.

*Teiresias*

And the whole tribe of tyrants grab at gain.

*Creon*

Do you realize you are talking to a king?

*Teiresias*

I know. Who helped you save this town you hold?

*Creon*

You're a wise seer, but you love wickedness.

*Teiresias*

You'll bring me to speak the unspeakable, very soon.

1060

*Creon*

Well, speak it out. But do not speak for profit.

*Teiresias*

No, there's no profit in my words for you.

*Creon*

You'd better realise that you can't deliver  
my mind, if you should sell it, to the buyer.

*Teiresias*

Know well, the sun will not have rolled its course  
many more days, before you come to give  
corpse for these corpses, child of your own loins.  
For you've confused the upper and lower worlds.  
You sent a life to settle in a tomb;  
you keep up here that which belongs below  
the corpse unburied, robbed of its release.  
Not you, nor any god that rules on high  
can claim him now.

1070

You rob the nether gods of what is theirs.  
So the pursuing horrors lie in wait  
to track you down. The Furies sent by Hades  
and by all gods will even you with your victims.  
Now say that I am bribed! At no far time  
shall men and women wail within your house.  
And all the cities that you fought in war  
whose sons had burial from wild beasts, or dogs,  
or birds that brought the stench of your great wrong  
back to each hearth, they move against you now.  
A Bowman, as you said, I send my shafts,

1080

now you have moved me, straight. You'll feel the wound.  
Boy, take me home now. Let him spend his rage  
on younger men, and learn to calm his tongue,  
and keep a better mind than now he does

(Exit.)

1090

*Chorus*

Lord, he has gone. Terrible prophecies!  
And since the time when I first grew grey hair  
his sayings to the city have been true.

*Creon*

I also know this. And my mind is torn.  
To yield is dreadful. But to stand against him.  
Dreadful to strike my spirit to destruction.

*Chorus*

Now you must come to counsel, and take advice.

*Creon*

What must I do? Speak, and I shall obey.

*Chorus*

Go free the maiden from that rocky house.  
Bury the dead who lies in readiness.

1100

*Creon*

This is your counsel? You would have me yield?

*Chorus*

Quick as you can. The gods move very fast  
when they bring ruin on misguided men.

*Creon*

How hard, abandonment of my desire.  
But I can fight necessity no more.

*Chorus*

Do it yourself. Leave it to no one else.

*Creon*

I'll go at once. Come, followers, to your work.  
You that are here round up the other fellows.

Take axes with you, hurry to that place  
that overlooks us.

1110

Now my decision has been overturned  
shall I, who bound her, set her free myself  
I've come to fear it's best to hold the laws  
of old tradition to the end of life.

(Exit)

*Chorus*

God of the many names, Semele's golden child,  
child of Olympian thunder, Italy's lord.  
Lord of Eleusis, where all men come  
to mother Demeter's plain  
Bacchus, who dwell in Thebes,  
by Ismenus' running water,  
where wild Bacchic women are at home,  
on the soil of the dragon seed.

1120

Seen in the glaring flame, high on the double mount,  
with the nymphs of Parnassus at play on the hill,  
seen by Kastalia's flowing stream.  
You come from the ivied heights,  
from green Euboea's shore.  
In immortal words we cry  
your name, lord, who watch the ways,  
the many ways of Thebes.

1130

This is your city, honored beyond the rest,  
the town of your mother's miracle-death.  
Now, as we wrestle our grim disease,  
come with healing step from Parnassus' slope  
or over the moaning sea.

1140

Leader in dance of the fire-pulsing stars,  
overseer of the voices of night,  
child of Zeus, be manifest,  
with due companionship of Maenad maids  
whose cry is but your name.

1150

*(Enter one of those who left with Creon, as messenger.)*

*Messenger*

Neighbors of Cadmus, and Amphion's house,  
 there is no kind of state in human life  
 which I now dare to envy or to blame.  
 Luck sets it straight, and luck she overturns  
 the happy or unhappy day by day.  
 No prophecy can deal with men's affairs.  
 Creon was envied once, as I believe,  
 for having saved this city from its foes  
 and having got full power in this land.  
 He steered it well. And he had noble sons.  
 Now everything is gone.  
 Yes, when a man has lost all happiness,  
 he's not alive. Call him a breathing corpse.  
 Be very rich at home. Live as a king.  
 But once your joy has gone, though these are left  
 they are smoke's shadow to lost happiness.

1160

1170

*Chorus*

What is the grief of princes that you bring?

*Messenger*

They're dead. The living are responsible.

*Chorus*

Who died? Who did the murder? Tell us now.

*Messenger*

Haemon is gone. One of his kin drew blood.

*Chorus*

But whose arm struck? His father's or his own?

*Messenger*

He killed himself. His blood is on his father.

*Chorus*

Seer, all too true the prophecy you told!

*Messenger*

This is the state of things. Now make your plans.

(Enter, from the palace, Eurydice.)

*Chorus*

Eurydice is with us now, I see. 1180  
Creon's poor wife She may have come by chance.  
She may have heard something about her son.

*Eurydice*

I heard your talk as I was coming out  
to greet the goddess Pallas with my prayer.  
And as I moved the bolts that held the door  
I heard of my own sorrow.  
I fell back fainting in my women's arms  
But say again just what the news you bring 1190  
I, whom you speak to, have known grief before.

*Messenger*

Dear lady, I was there, and I shall tell,  
leaving out nothing of the true account.  
Why should I make it soft for you with tales  
to prove myself a liar? Truth is right.  
I followed your husband to the plain's far edge,  
where Polyneices' corpse was lying still  
unpitied. The dogs had torn him all apart. 1200  
We prayed the goddess of all journeyings,  
and Pluto, that they turn their wrath to kindness,  
we gave the final purifying bath,  
then burned the poor remains on new-cut boughs,  
and heaped a high mound of his native earth.  
Then turned we to the maiden's rocky bed,  
death's hollow marriage-chamber.  
But, still far off, one of us heard a voice  
in keen lament by that unblest abode.  
He ran and told the master. As Creon came  
he heard confusion crying He groaned and spoke: 1210  
"Am I a prophet now, and do I tread  
the saddest of all roads I ever trod?  
My son's voice crying! Servants, run up close,



stand by the tomb and look, push through the crevice  
where we built the pile of rock, right to the entry.  
Find out if that is Haemon's voice I hear  
or if the gods are tricking me indeed "

We obeyed the order of our mournful master.

In the far corner of the tomb we saw

1220

her, hanging by the neck, caught in a noose  
of her own linen veiling

Haemon embraced her as she hung, and mourned  
his bride's destruction, dead and gone below,  
his father's actions, the unfated marriage.

When Creon saw him, he groaned terribly,  
and went toward him, and called him with lament.

"What have you done, what plan have you caught up,  
what sort of suffering is killing you?

Come out, my child, I do beseech you, come!"

1230

The boy looked at him with his angry eyes,  
spat in his face and spoke no further word.

He drew his sword, but as his father ran,  
he missed his aim. Then the unhappy boy,  
in anger at himself, leant on the blade.

It entered, half its length, into his side.

While he was conscious he embraced the maiden,  
holding her gently Last, he gasped out blood,  
red blood on her white cheek.

Corpse on a corpse he lies. He found his marriage.

1240

Its celebration in the halls of Hades.

So he has made it very clear to men

that to reject good counsel is a crime.

*(Eurydice returns to the house.)*

*Chorus*

What do you make of this? The queen has gone  
in silence. We know nothing of her mind.

*Messenger*

I wonder at her, too. But we can hope  
that she has gone to mourn her son within

with her own women, not before the town.  
She knows discretion She will do no wrong.

1250

*Chorus*

I am not sure. This muteness may portend  
as great disaster as a loud lament.

*Messenger*

I will go in and see if some deep plan  
hides in her heart's wild pain. You may be right.  
There can be heavy danger in mute grief.

*(The messenger goes into the house. Creon enters with his  
followers. They are carrying Haemon's body on a bier.)*

*Chorus*

But look, the king draws near.  
His own hand brings  
the witness of his crime,  
the doom he brought on himself.

1260

*Creon*

O crimes of my wicked heart,  
harshness bringing death.  
You see the killer, you see the kin he killed.  
My planning was all unblest.  
Son, you have died too soon  
Oh, you have gone away  
through my fault, not your own.

*Chorus*

You have learned justice, though it comes too late.

1270

*Creon*

Yes, I have learned in sorrow. It was a god who struck,  
who has weighted my head with disaster; he drove me to wild  
strange ways,  
his heavy heel on my joy.  
Oh sorrows, sorrows of men.

*(Re-enter the messenger, from a side door of the palace.)*

*Messenger*

Master, you hold one sorrow in your hands  
but you have more, stored up inside the house. 1280

*Creon*

What further suffering can come on me?

*Messenger*

Your wife has died. The dead man's mother in deed,  
poor soul, her wounds are fresh.

*Creon*

Hades, harbor of all,  
you have destroyed me now.  
Terrible news to hear, horror the tale you tell. 1290  
I was dead, and you kill me again.  
Boy, did I hear you right?  
Did you say the queen was dead,  
slaughter on slaughter heaped?

*(The central doors of the palace begin to open.)*

*Chorus*

Now you can see. Concealment is all over.

*(The doors are open, and the corpse of Eurydice is revealed.)*

*Creon*

My second sorrow is here. Surely no fate remains  
which can strike me again. Just now, I held my son in my arms.  
And now I see her dead.  
Woe for the mother and son. 1300

*Messenger*

There, by the altar, dying on the sword,  
her eyes fell shut. She wept her older son  
who died before, and this one. Last of all  
she cursed you as the killer of her children.

*Creon*

I am mad with fear. Will no one strike  
and kill me with cutting sword?  
Sorrowful, soaked in sorrow to the bone! 1310

*Messenger*

Yes, for she held you guilty in the death  
of him before you, and the elder dead.

*Creon*

How did she die?

*Messenger*

Struck home at her own heart  
when she had heard of Haemon's suffering.

*Creon*

This is my guilt, all mine. I killed you, I say it clear.  
Servants, take me away, out of the sight of men.  
I who am nothing more than nothing now.

1320

*Chorus*

Your plan is good—if any good is left.  
Best to cut short our sorrow.

*Creon*

Let me go, let me go. May death come quick,  
bringing my final day.  
O let me never see tomorrow's dawn.

1330

*Chorus*

That is the future's. We must look to now.  
What will be is in other hands than ours.

*Creon*

All my desire was in that prayer of mine.

*Chorus*

Pray not again. No mortal can escape  
the doom prepared for him.

*Creon*

Take me away at once, the frantic man who killed  
my son, against my meaning. I cannot rest.  
My life is warped past cure. My fate has struck me down.

1340

*(Creon and his attendants enter the house.)*

*Chorus*

Our happiness depends  
on wisdom all the way.  
The gods must have their due.  
Great words by men of pride  
bring greater blows upon them.  
So wisdom comes to the old.

1350

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE foregoing is a translation of the text of Jebb's third edition (Cambridge, 1900). In the dialogue, I have tried to bring into English almost all that I thought I saw in the Greek, even though this was to run the risk of a clumsy literalism. In the choruses, I have taken more freedom.

The following are the places where my rendering is of another text than Jebb's

486 *ὀμαιμονεστέρα* A, other MSS, and the scholiast in L. *ὀμαιμονεστέρα* L, as corrected from *-ais*, Jebb.

The extravagance of imagining the impossible possibility of closer blood kin than a sister seems to me in character for Creon at this point. (For a similar use of language, cf. Aeschylus *Septem* 197.)

519 *τούτους* MSS and Jebb. *ἴσους* is recorded by L's scholiast and read by Pearson. Line 520 seems even more pointed if Creon is picking up Antigone's own term to throw at her.

572. This line is Ismene's in all the manuscripts. The only traditional evidence for giving it to Antigone is that the Aldine edition (1502) and Turnebus (1553) gave it to her. These editors may have had manuscript evidence lost to us. But they may also, like most modern editors, including Jebb, have been exercising their own sense of fitness. It is touching to have an Antigone stung from her silence to defend her lover. Further, if the line is not hers, we are faced with an Antigone who never mentions him; and much has been built on this.

The best argument for giving her the line is Creon's reply to it (573). If Ismene has 572 "your marriage" must mean "the marriage you talk of," or words to that effect. This is possible, but the phrase would certainly come out more naturally to Antigone.

Confusions of speakers in stichomythia are many, and I see no possibility of certainty here. It is our misfortune that the line in question is an important one. I have stayed with the manuscripts, which seems to me all one can do.

574. This is Ismene's line in all MSS. Boeckh, followed by Jebb, gave it to the chorus. I have followed my own precedent in 572, and stayed with the MSS. The question might come, as Jebb argues, more reasonably from the chorus than from Ismene, who has had her answer already. But she is not too logical to ask the same appalling question twice

600 *κόνις* MSS, Jebb *κοπίς* Reiske and others, Jebb in earlier editions, Pearson. See Jebb's note and appendix He was of two minds here. My own final feeling is that for dust to be doing the reaping is too much, even for a tragic chorus.

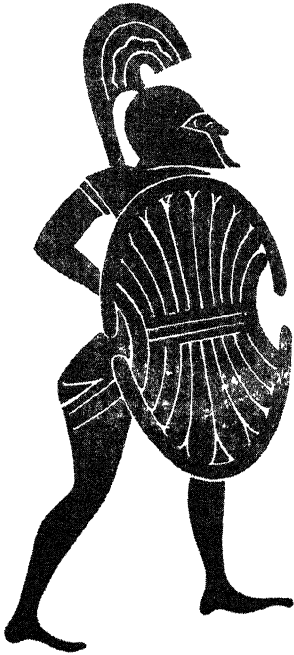
609 *παντογῆρος* L, the MSS generally, L's scholiast *παντ'ἀγρεύων*, Jebb. This image was too strained for Jebb (and many others), as the dust in 600 was for me. De gustibus . . .

904-20. Jebb (following and followed by many) brackets these lines, which are in all the MSS, and were known to Aristotle as Antigone's. I think he is wrong, but he should not be pilloried as a prudish Victorian for this. The positions of his note and appendix are well taken and held. Some sensible contemporaries (e g., Fitts and Fitzgerald) are with him still. For those, like myself, who are sure the lines are Antigone's, there is drama in her abandoning her moralities and clinging to her irrational profundity of feeling for her lost and irreplaceable brother, devising legalistic arguments for her intellectual justification. Jebb finds the syntax of 909-12 strained past all bearing, but I believe Antigone's obscurity here a touch of realism parallel to the confused and contradictory negatives of her opening lines, which Jebb allows her.

# AJAX

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

*JOHN MOORE*





## INTRODUCTION TO *AJAX*

THE *Ajax* is probably the earliest of the seven plays by Sophocles which are preserved. The *Antigone* is generally thought to have been produced in 442 or 441 B C, and the *Ajax* appears to belong to the same period of Sophocles' work. In dramatic technique these plays have not the suppleness of the *Oedipus*, but they are in no sense to be regarded as immature works. At the time he produced the *Antigone*, Sophocles was already fifty-five years old and had been producing tragedies in the Theatre of Dionysus for a quarter of a century. The *Ajax*, too, is the work not of a novice but of a seasoned dramatist. It is a play of very remarkable beauties and likewise of some perplexities

The subject which Sophocles has chosen is the shame and death of Ajax, which follow on his defeat in the contest for Achilles' armor, and the growth, in and after this shame and death and triumphing over them, of a revealed sense of his heroic virtue and magnanimity. It will be seen that this subject is a single subject: the death of Ajax, taken quite simply in itself, completes nothing; the play's action is complete only when the spectator is brought to an altered estimate of the meaning of Ajax' career and destiny.

Throughout the drama, Ajax remains the central issue and our principal concern. Sophocles' judgment of him is not simple: he sees that Ajax and the Ajax-world of value and aspiration have their limitations in point of sympathy and insight; and the sense of these limitations is in part conveyed to us by means of the figure of Odysseus. Yet to imagine, as some writers have done, that the structure of the play is a polarity, so to speak, between Ajax and Odysseus is surely a distortion. The major dramatic subject, the weight and heft of it, is Ajax. The greatness of his demand upon life is the thing that we must, above all, be made to feel; and Sophocles places this theme before us by the full dramatization he gives of Ajax' suffering and resolution, of the dismay and pathetic dependence of those around him, and of their desolation when his protection is removed.

Sophocles' version of the myth is not original with him; he chose it from among the epic treatments which were already familiar. It is interesting, though, that he chose the version of the story which is most discreditable to Ajax. Pindar, writing a generation before Sophocles, follows a different version in which there is no hint of any attempt by Ajax to murder the Greek chieftains, no lunacy, and no assault upon the livestock. Ajax is simply filled with chagrin because of his disappointment and falls upon his sword. This version suited Pindar's artistic purpose very well: it provided him with a single arresting picture of outraged merit which could serve for a telling allusion and no more. For a dramatist, though, there were richer possibilities in the ghastlier version of the story which emphasized Ajax' criminality and disgrace. In choosing this version Sophocles incurred one serious embarrassment: his hero has *ex hypothesi* been guilty of a foul and treacherous attempt to assassinate the men who have wronged him, and in the prosecution of his plan he has come to grief in a most unseemly way. Sophocles surmounts the difficulty with his usual dexterity. He contrives in the main to make us lose sight of Ajax' criminality, while making of his ignominy a capital dramatic resource. The disclosure of Ajax in his tent, fouled by the animals he has insanely tormented and killed, is more than a powerful *coup de théâtre*; it is a fearful and summary image of total degradation not merely of heroic, but of all human, value. The process by which this image is transformed and Ajax' disaster irradiated by his recovery of heroic strength and human relatedness is the true action of the play.

This process is already well begun by the end of the long scene in which Ajax is disclosed among the slaughtered animals. The scene ends harshly, and, indeed, it is marked throughout by a certain acerbity. Nevertheless, out of his chagrin and misery Ajax is able to reaffirm some part of his former image of himself: rather than endure disgrace, he is resolved to die. There is a moment of tenderness for Eurysaces, none at all for Tecmessa; and even the address to Eurysaces, one feels, is an uncompromising assertion of the quality of Ajax more than a response to the child.

In the next scene he appears an altered man. Not wholly so: his

purpose is unchanged. But he discovers in himself, rather to his surprise, a softening of his former harshness. He is touched now by the plight of his wife and child, they must be deceived, so that he may have an opportunity of doing in peace what he has to do; but he deceives them tenderly, expressing his true intentions, but in ambiguous words which they are bound to misunderstand. Thus the speech is a farewell to them, while at the same time it expresses a new attitude in him. His suicide is not to be a frantic gesture of despair: it will be performed composedly, on the seashore, and, when the act is done, he, or something of him, will be saved (*sesômenon*). The softening of temper which this scene registers is therefore a necessary step in the development of the drama, and the splendid lines in which Ajax compares the softening of his own severity to the yielding of the great stern things in Nature before their gentler opposites have a deep psychological appropriateness.

The scenes which now follow are an impressive example of Sophocles' skill in dramatic organization. As Ajax leaves, sword in hand, bent as we know upon suicide, the Chorus break into an ecstatic song of joy, for they have been deceived by Ajax' words no less than Tecmessa and Eurysaces. At once the messenger arrives with news of the alarming prognostications of Calchas: if Ajax has left his tent, there is no hope for him. Joy and relief are now replaced by terror; Tecmessa understands that she has been deceived; and she and the Chorus in great agitation leave the scene, in haste to forestall Ajax' death.

But Ajax appears, calmly making his preparations (we understand that the scene has changed, as it does sometimes, though rarely, in Greek tragedy—we are now in the place Ajax has chosen by the shore). His death speech is long, eloquent, and handsome. He prays for a quiet death and for his body to be discovered first by Teucer; he calls the Sun-God to carry the news to his home, and the Erinyes to pursue his enemies; and, lastly, he makes his farewell to the world above and his addresses to the world below. Athena is not present by even a mention to disturb the harmonious order of the scene. True, he does not forgive his enemies: to forgive your enemies when you are dying and they surviving is an impulse which lies outside the

ethical universe of Sophocles, unless there is a hint of it, and that doubtful, in *Antigone*.

Upon this splendid and now silent solitude Tecmessa and the Chorus urgently break in: the search, the discovery, the broken-hearted cries of grief come rapidly, one upon the other. Those whom Ajax has left are now helpless. They are threatened in every conceivable way; they cannot vindicate Ajax or protect themselves. Only for us Tecmessa's beautiful words (which this translator is helpless to render) may express a portion of the response that seems to be appropriate. Evidently the drama cannot end here, and if Sophocles has not found an entirely happy solution to the problem of how to conclude it, that is not because no conclusion was necessary. Beyond question, we attend to the long wrangle between Teucer and the Atreidae with a sense of diminished tragic feeling, not, however, for the reason that the question of Ajax' burial cannot concern us but because the mode selected or enforced upon Sophocles here, that of the set debate, entails a disastrous lowering of tone. The right argument for burial is Odysseus' argument, not Teucer's; and in the *Antigone* the heroine makes no corresponding defense of Polynices.

The *Ajax* has, then, its imperfections and defects. The role of Athena is perplexing, not to say fiendish. Sophocles ignores with perhaps somewhat too ready a skill our repugnance at Ajax' conduct. The wrangle at the end seems unduly prolonged and at times undignified. But all this counts for little in comparison with the admirable and central virtue of the *Ajax*, its sustained and noble affirmation of the heroic in human life, as expressed in Ajax himself, and its rendering in Tecmessa of the beauty of entire devotion.

In making this translation I have followed the text of Sir Richard Jebb.

## CHARACTERS

*Athena*

*Odysseus*

*Ajax*

*Chorus of Salaminian Sailors*

*Tecmessa*

*Messenger*

*Teucer*

*Menelaus*

*Agamemnon*

## AJAX

SCENE: *Before the "tent" of Ajax, a fairly considerable structure covered with canvas and equipped with a large principal door and a second door on the flank, which gives access to a lower lateral extension of the structure. As the play opens, the goddess Athena is revealed on a high platform which may be conveniently placed over the lateral extension of the tent. Odysseus enters and moves eagerly across the stage as though tracing footprints.*

*Athena*

Odysseus, I have always seen and marked you  
Stalking to pounce upon your enemies;  
And now by the tent of Ajax, where he keeps  
Last place upon the shore, I find you busy  
Tracing and scanning these fresh tracks of his,  
New-printed on the sand, to guess if he's inside.  
You've coursed him like a keen Laconian hound.  
In fact, he has just come in. His head is moist with sweat,  
His murderous hands are moistened too. . . . But now 10  
You need not go on peering in—no, tell me,  
What is the reason for your eager search?  
For I have knowledge and can set you right.

*Odysseus*

Voice of Athena, dearest utterance  
Of all the gods' to me—I cannot see you,  
And yet how clearly I can catch your words,  
That speak as from a trumpet's throat of bronze!  
You guess my purpose; I have been circling  
Steadily on the trail of a man I hate,  
Shield-bearing Ajax. 20  
He has done a thing—sometime last night it was—  
An act of staggering horror . . . aimed at us,

If it all can be believed; nothing about it  
Is surely known—we are floundering in conjecture,  
And I have volunteered to search it out.  
This much is sure: we found not long ago  
Our flocks and herds of captured beasts all ruined  
And struck with havoc by some butchering hand.  
Their guards were slaughtered with them. Everyone  
Puts the blame of it on Ajax. One man saw him  
Alone, bounding over the plain and carrying  
A sword still wet with blood—this man informed me  
And set me on the track I leapt to the scent  
At once; and partly I can trace it still,  
Though partly, too, I'm baffled. How can these prints be his?  
You come just as I need you. Now and always,  
As heretofore, your hand shall be my guide

30

*Athena*

I know, Odysseus;  
Some time ago I felt your need and came  
On the path to guard and help you in your chase.

*Odysseus*

Tell me, dear mistress: am I working to some purpose?

*Athena*

Yes, this is the man that did the things you speak of.

*Odysseus*

What motive, though, prompted that senseless hand?

40

*Athena*

He was aggrieved, because of Achilles' armor.

*Odysseus*

But why this wild assault upon the flocks?

*Athena*

Ah, he thought it was your murder that fouled his hands.

*Odysseus*

It was a stroke, then, aimed at the whole Greek army?

*Athena*

A successful one, if I had not been watchful.

*Odysseus*

What desperate daring nerved him to the thing?

*Athena*

In the night he was moving upon you, stealthily and alone.

*Odysseus*

Did he come close? Was he reaching near his goal?

*Athena*

To the very doors of the two supreme commanders

*Odysseus*

And how did he check that hand that yearned for murder?

50

*Athena*

I checked him; I threw before his eyes  
Obsessive notions, thoughts of insane joy,  
To fall on the mingled droves of captured livestock,  
The undistributed loot which the herdsmen had in charge.  
He hit them,  
Hewed out a weltering shambles of horned beasts,  
Cleaving them down in a circle all around him.  
Sometimes he thought he held the sons of Atreus  
In his grip to kill them, and then again  
His fancy would seize some other of the chiefs  
The man was wandering in diseased delusions;  
I pressed him, urged him into the fatal net.  
At last, when he was weary of the slaughter,  
He hobbled the cattle that were still alive,  
And the sheep, and brought them to his tent, thinking  
It was men he had captured and not poor horned beasts.  
And now he has them bound inside the lodge  
And is tormenting them. But I shall show you  
His madness in plain view Take note of it;  
Then you can publish it to all the Greeks.

60



(*Odysseus shrinks back.*)

Get a grip on your nerves and wait. It's no disaster  
To see the man. I'll turn his glance away.  
He'll never see you or know your face. Halloo!  
You there, who are binding fast your captives' arms  
With fetters, come outside! Ajax! Come out!

70

*Odysseus*

Athena, what can you be thinking of?  
Don't call him out!

*Athena*

Quiet, now! No cowardice!

*Odysseus*

No, no, for heaven's sake!  
I'd very much rather he stayed inside.

*Athena*

What are you afraid of? He was only a man before.

*Odysseus*

Yes, but he was my enemy and still is.

*Athena*

But to laugh at your enemies—  
What sweeter laughter can there be than that?

*Odysseus*

It's enough for me if he stays just where he is.

80

*Athena*

You're afraid, then, to see a madman face to face?

*Odysseus*

Certainly if he were sane, I should never shrink from him.

*Athena*

No need to do so now. He will stand near you,  
And yet not see you.

*Odysseus*

How is that possible, if he sees with the same eyes still?

*Athena*

I can darken even the most brilliant vision.

*Odysseus*

I know that a god's contriving may do anything.

*Athena*

Be still, then, and remain right where you are.

*Odysseus*

If I must, I must. But I wish I were anywhere but here!

*Athena*

Ajax, I call you once again!

Is this how much you care for your old ally?

90

*(Ajax enters through the principal door of the tent, carrying a  
two-thonged leather whip )*

*Ajax*

Hail, Athena! Daughter of Zeus,

Hail and welcome! How well you have stood by me!

I shall deck you with trophies all of gold

From the spoils of this hunting, in thanksgiving.

*Athena*

Excellent. But tell me, did you dip

Your blade well in the Greeks' blood?

*Ajax*

I think I may boast as much. I don't deny it

*Athena*

Did you move your weaponed hand against the generals?

*Ajax*

I don't think they will slight Ajax again.

*Athena*

The men are dead, if I understand you correctly.

*Ajax*

Dead they are. Let them rob my armor now!

100

*Athena*

Tell me, please, what happened to Laertes' son?  
He didn't escape you?

*Ajax*

Oho, that villainous sneak! You want to know where *he* is?

*Athena*

Yes. Your adversary, you know. Odysseus

*Ajax*

He's sitting there inside, my sweetest prisoner  
I don't intend for him to die just yet.

*Athena*

What are you going to do first?

*Ajax*

First bind him to the pole that props my barrack.

*Athena*

Poor miserable man! What treatment will you give him?

*Ajax*

Crimson his back with this whip first, then kill him.

110

*Athena*

Poor wretch! In pity don't mistreat him so!

*Ajax*

Have your way, goddess, in all else, and welcome.  
But that man's punishment shall not be changed.

*Athena*

Well, then, if your good pleasure wills it so,  
Do execution, carry out all you have in mind.

*Ajax*

I must be at my work. Goddess, I grant you this:  
Stand always my ally as you have today.

(*Exit.*)

*Athena*

Do you see, Odysseus, how great the gods' power is?

Who was more full of foresight than this man,  
Or abler, do you think, to act with judgment?

120

*Odysseus*

None that I know of. Yet I pity  
His wretchedness, though he is my enemy,  
For the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him.  
I think of him, yet also of myself;  
For I see the true state of all us that live—  
We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.

*Athena*

Look well at this, and speak no towering word  
Yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly  
Because your hand is weightier than another's,  
Or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day  
Inclines the balance of all human things  
To sink or rise again. Know that the gods  
Love men of steady sense and hate the proud

130

*(Exeunt )*

*(Enter the Chorus of Salaminian sailors )*

*Chorus*

Son of Telamon, lord of the firm floor  
Of Salamis, where the sea chafes and swirls,  
Ajax, my lord,  
When you are fortunate, I too feel gladness;  
But when the fury of Zeus or the virulent  
Slur of the Greeks' slander  
Strikes you, I shrink in fear, and my eye  
Like a bird's, like a dove's, shows terror.  
Now out of this fading night  
Come huge oppressive rumors of dismay,  
Wretched and shameful;  
For you, they say, in the dark went striding out  
Over the horse-delighting grassland,  
Swinging your bright sword, slaughtering and wasting  
All that remained of booty,

140

Flocks and herds belonging to the host  
 Such tales as these, whisperings and fabrications,  
 Odysseus is supplying to every ear,  
 And many believe him. For as he speaks of you, 150  
 His words win credit, and each new hearer  
 More than the teller relishes his chance  
 To insult at your distress.  
 Strike at a great man, and you will not miss;  
 But if one should bend such slander at me,  
 None would believe him Envy stalks  
 After magnates of wealth and power,  
 Yet humble men without their princes  
 Are a frail prop for a fortress. They  
 Should be dependent upon the great, 160  
 And the great be upheld by lesser ones.  
 But the shallow cannot be taught these things—  
 They raise instead an ignorant clamor;  
 And against it we have no defense, my lord,  
 But you. When once they are out of your sight,  
 They screech like a gaggle of angry birds;  
 But fear of the huge falcon,  
 All of a sudden, I think,  
 If you should only appear, 170  
 Would make them cower and be still.

*Strophe*

Can it have been wild, bull-consorting Artemis  
 That stirred you, evil Tale,  
 Mother of my disgrace, to move against the flocks?  
 Was she angered perhaps for victory-dues unpaid,  
 Or disappointed of rich captured arms,  
 Or hunting recompense for a stag slain?  
 Or was it Enyalios, the bronze-cased Lord of War  
 That blamed *our* lord's co-operant spear,  
 And spitefully paid him out in the night's error? 180

*Antistrophe*

For never, son of Telamon, of your own heart's prompting,  
Would you so far have strayed  
To fall upon the flocks. Yet Frenzy comes  
When the gods will Apollo and Zeus forbend  
These tales be true that the Greeks are spreading!  
Yet if the high kings  
Or Sisyphus' execrated son  
Weave with false art a suppositious tale, 190  
Guard us from that false speech—  
Hide not, so, your face in your tent beside the sea.

*Epode*

Rise, up from the place  
Where you sit so obdurate, forbearing to fight your cause,  
While ruin flares toward heaven,  
And your enemies' bold outrage  
Freshens through all the glades  
In a blast of ringing laughter and hard spite.  
But I am fixed in my grief. 200

(Enter Tecmessa from the tent.)

*Tecmessa*

Mariners who serve with Ajax,  
Our prince of the old and kingly line  
Sprung from Athenian earth, we  
Who care for him and his father's far-off home  
Have cause indeed for grief;  
For he, our great grim man of power, lies low,  
And a troubling flood is on him.

*Chorus*

But what, succeeding to yesterday's  
Load of wretchedness, has this night brought?  
Tell us, daughter of Phrygian Teleutas; 210  
For the valiant Ajax loves you,  
And honors his spear-won bride—  
Being near him, perhaps you have knowledge and can speak.

*Tecmessa*

But how shall I speak a thing that appalls my speech?  
 You shall hear too clearly of an accident  
 Awful as death.  
 Madness has seized our noble Ajax;  
 He has come to ignominy in the night  
 What a sight is to be seen within the tent!  
 Victims, slain with his own hand, deep in blood,  
 As for an oracle, speakingly reveal him.

220

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

You have vouched it true, then, that report of our fiery chief,  
 That tale we cannot bear, yet may not escape:  
 Huge it grows, and authoritative voices  
 Give it huge reinforcement. Oh, I fear  
 For that which is moving upon us. He will be done to death,  
 Our glorious prince, because  
 With frenzied hands and a dark sword he slew  
 Herds and their mounted guardians in a heap.

230

*Tecmessa*

Alas, then, it can only have been from there  
 That he brought those bound beasts home!  
 And some he slew on the tent's floor  
 Cleanly with a neck-cut; others he hacked asunder  
 With slashes at their ribs. But two special  
 White-footed rams he lifted up, shore off  
 One's head and the tip of its tongue, and cast them from him;  
 The other he bound upright against a pillar,  
 Seized a stout length of harness, made from it  
 A singing whip, two-thonged, to lash him with,  
 And, mid the blows, poured forth such awful curses  
 As no man, but some demon, must have taught him.

240

*Chorus*

*Antistrophe*

Now is the time for a man to muffle his head

And over the land to urge his stealthy way,  
 Or else, sitting the thwarts to row,  
 To trust his life to a ship's swift course on the deep— 250  
 Such are the threats that the sons of Atreus, two in power,  
 Stir toward us. I am in dread to share  
 With him the blows and hurt of the killing stone;  
 For an awful thing to be near is the doom that holds him.

*Tecmessa*

No longer so After the lightning  
 Flash and leap of the storm-wind,  
 He is calm But now, being clear in mind,  
 He is freshly miserable. It is a painful thing  
 To look at your own trouble and know 260  
 That you yourself and no one else has made it.

*Chorus*

But still, if his fit is past, I should think he was lucky;  
 A seizure, once it is done with, matters less.

*Tecmessa*

If someone posed the question, which would you choose:  
 To grieve your friends while feeling joy yourself,  
 Or to be wretched with them, shares alike?

*Chorus*

The last, lady, is twice as bad a thing.

*Tecmessa*

We are ill no longer now, but merely ruined.

*Chorus*

What do you mean? I cannot understand you. 270

*Tecmessa*

Ajax, so long as the mad fit was on him,  
 Himself felt joy at all his wretchedness,  
 Though we, his sane companions, grieved indeed.  
 But now that he's recovered and breathes clear,  
 His own anguish totally masters him,



While we are no less wretched than before.

Is not this a redoubling of our grief?

*Chorus*

You are quite right. Lady, I wonder

If a fearful blow of God's anger may have hit him.

It is strange that he feels no happier sane than raving.

280

*Tecmessa*

Strange, perhaps. But the facts are as they are.

*Chorus*

How at the start did this catastrophe

Swoop down? Tell us: we share the pain of it.

*Tecmessa*

Indeed, you are partners and shall hear it all.

In the depth of night, after the evening flares

Had all gone out, Ajax, with sword in hand,

Went slowly groping toward the door, intent

Upon some pointless errand. I objected,

And said, "Ajax, what are you doing? Why

Do you stir? No messenger has summoned you:

You have heard no trumpet. Why, the whole army now's  
asleep!"

290

He answered briefly in a well-worn phrase,

"Woman, a woman's decency is silence."

I heard, and said no more; he issued forth alone.

I don't know what horrors occurred outside,

But when he came back in, he brought with him

A mass of hobbled bulls and shepherd dogs

And woolly captives. He struck the heads off some;

Others' he severed with an upward cut;

And some, held fast in bonds, he kept abusing

With words and blows, as though they were human beings—

And all the while he was vexing poor dumb beasts.

300

At length he darted out the door and spoke

Wild, rending words, directed toward some phantom,

Exulting with a harsh laugh *how he'd paid them,*

*Odysseus and the sons of Atreus.* Then

He sprang back in again, and somehow, slowly,  
 By painful stages came to his right mind.  
 And when he saw his dwelling full of Ruin,  
 He beat his head and bellowed. There he sat,  
 Wreckage himself among the wreck of corpses,  
 The sheep slaughtered; and in an anguished gripe  
 Of fist and fingernail he clutched his hair. 310  
 He sat so, without speaking, for some time;  
 Then finally spoke those fearful, threatening words—  
 What should befall me if I failed to say  
 What had befallen him: he asked me where he stood.  
 Friends, I was terrified by all he'd done,  
 And told him, simply, everything I knew.  
 Then he cried out—long wails of shattering pain,  
 Like none I ever heard from him before;  
 He always used to say such cries were base,  
 Marks of an abject spirit. His own way 320  
 Was not to cry aloud in his distress,  
 But low and muffled, like a roaring bull.  
 Now, though, quite overcome by his misfortune,  
 Refusing food and drink, he sits there motionless,  
 Relapsed among the beasts his iron brought down.  
 There are clear signs, too,  
 That he's aiming to do some dreadful thing; his words  
 And his lamentations both somehow suggest it.  
 Friends—this was the thing I came to ask of you—  
 Won't you come in and comfort him, if you can?  
 He is noble, and may listen to his friends. 330

*Chorus*

Honored Tecmessa, what a fearful frenzy,  
 By your account, his griefs have moved him to!

*(Ajax inside the tent gives a heavy groan, which rises  
 slowly almost to a shriek.)*

*Tecmessa*

Worse may be coming. Didn't you hear his voice,  
 Ajax', distorted in that ghastly cry?

(*Ajax groans again miserably.*)

*Chorus*

Either he still is mad, or else can't bear  
The company his madness made around him.

*Ajax (within)*

Boy! Where is my child?

*Tecmessa*

Dear God! Eurysaces, it's you he's calling.  
What can he want? Where are you? What shall I do?

340

*Ajax (within)*

Teucer! Where are you? Where is my brother Teucer?  
Will that raid of his last forever? And I here perishing!

*Chorus*

No, he seems to be sane. Open the door.  
Perhaps seeing someone, though it's only us,  
May help him to compose himself.

*Tecmessa (opens the door, revealing Ajax sitting dejectedly in the  
middle of slaughtered bulls and sheep)*

There, now you see.  
You can judge for yourself the state of his affairs,  
And how the man is too.

*Ajax*

Ah!  
Loved mariners, my only friends,  
Still faithful in the old proved way,  
Look at this swirling tide of grief  
And the storm of blood behind it,  
Coursing around and round me.

350

*Chorus*

Horrible!  
Tecmessa, what you told us was too true—  
Insanity stands here revealed indeed!

*Ajax*

*Antistrophe*

Ah!

Stout hearts and skilful seamen,

Strong hands to move the oar,

I see no friend but you,

No, none, to ease my pain.

For God's sake, help me die!

360

*Chorus*

Hush! Check those awful words!

Don't seek a worse cure for an ill disease,

And make your pain still heavier than it is.

*Ajax*

*Strophe*

Here I am, the bold, the valiant,

Unflinching in the shock of war,

A terrible threat to unsuspecting beasts.

Oh! what a mockery I have come to! What indignity!

*Tecmessa*

Ajax, my lord and master,

I beg you not to say such things.

*Ajax*

Go away! Take yourself out of my sight!

370

(*He groans.*)

*Chorus*

In God's name, be more gentle and more temperate.

*Ajax*

How could I be so cursed?

To let those precious villains out of my hand,

And fall on goats and cattle,

On crumpled horns and splendid flocks,

Shedding their dark blood!

*Chorus*

The thing is done. Why wail about it now?

You cannot make it undone.

*Ajax*

*Antistrophe*

Ah, yes, son of Laertes  
 Spying everywhere, always  
 The tool of every mischief,  
 Filthiest scoundrel of all the army,  
 What a huge laugh you're laughing now, what gloating!

380

*Chorus*

It is God's giving if we laugh or weep.

*Ajax*

Ah, if I could just once catch sight of him!  
 Crushed as I am, I'd . . .

*Chorus (interrupting)*

My lord, no blustering words.  
 Your situation's desperate; can't you see?

*Ajax*

Zeus, father of my fathers,  
 How can I strike them down,  
 That devious, hateful rogue and the two joined kings,  
 And last find death myself?

390

*Tecmessa*

When you pray that prayer, why, pray for my death too;  
 Why should I live when once my lord is dead?

*Ajax*

*Strophe*

O  
 Darkness that is my light,  
 Murk of the underworld, my only brightness,  
 Oh, take me to yourself to be your dweller,  
 Receive and keep me. I cannot look  
 To any of the race of gods for help,  
 Being no longer worthy,  
 Nor yet to humankind.  
 But the martial goddess, daughter of Zeus, cruelly works my ruin.

400

Where shall a man flee?  
Where shall I turn for refuge?  
All that I was has perished  
With these poor creatures here,  
And I abused by a fool's dream  
Of stalk and capture. Friends, friends,  
The massed army will take my life  
With bloody insistent blows.

*Tecmessa*

What wretchedness, to hear a brave man speak  
Such words as once he would not deign to use!

410

*Ajax*

*Antistrophe*

O  
Sounding straits of the sea  
Caves by the sea's edge, meadows on the shore,  
Long and long have you kept me here in Troyland;  
But now I shall not revive again, never again—  
A man of sense may know it.  
Scamander, neighboring river, gentle to Greeks,  
You shall no longer see this man,  
Such a man (let me now speak my boast)  
As Troy ne'er saw the like of, not in all  
The warlike host that hither came from Greece.  
But now in dishonor  
I lie abject.

420

*Chorus*

I cannot bid you stifle such great griefs;  
And yet it is agony to hear your grieving.

*Ajax*

Agony. Who would have thought my name and fortune  
Could square so well together! My name is Ajax:  
Agony is its meaning. And my fortunes  
Are cause indeed for an agony of wailing,

430

Cause and enough twice over. How my father,  
 Fighting here under Ida long ago,  
 Won with his sword the loveliest prize of all  
 For valor, and sweet praise at his return;  
 But I, his son,  
 Coming in my turn with a force no less  
 To this same land of Troy, no less than he a champion,  
 Nor less deserving, yet am left an outcast,  
 Shamed by the Greeks, to perish as I do! 440  
 And yet I seem to know this simple truth:  
 If the bestowing of the famous armor  
 Had rested with Achilles while he lived,  
 To give them as a war-prize to the bravest,  
 No rival then would have filched them from my hands,  
 But now the sons of Atreus have contrived  
 That a man of most dishonest mind should have them,  
 Pushing my claims aside. And I say this,  
 That if my eyes and mind had not leapt whirling  
 Wide from my aim, those two would never again  
 Cheat anyone with their awards and ballots!  
 But, instead, the fierce-eyed, overpowering 450  
 Daughter of Zeus, just then as I was readying  
 My hand and plot against them, set me sprawling,  
 Distaught and frenzied, and I dipped my hands  
 In the blood of beasts like these. And now they are laughing  
 And triumph in their clear escape, which I  
 Never intended for them. But when God  
 Strikes harm, a worse man often foils his better.  
 And now, Ajax—what is to be done now?  
 I am hated by the gods, that's plain; the Greek camp hates me:  
 Troy and the ground I stand upon detest me.  
 Shall I go, then, from this place where the ships ride, 460  
 Desert the Atridae, and cross the Aegean to my home?  
 But when I'm there,  
 What countenance can I show my father Telamon?  
 How will he ever stand the sight of me

If I come before him naked, armed with no glory,  
 When he himself won chaplets of men's praise?  
 That won't bear thinking of. Well, then,  
 Shall I make a rush against the walls of Troy,  
 Join with them all in single combat, do  
 Some notable exploit, and find my death in it?  
 But that might give some comfort to the sons of Atreus.  
 No I must find some better way entirely— 470  
 An enterprise which will prove to my old father  
 That the son of his loins is not by breed a weakling.  
 It's a contemptible thing to want to live forever  
 When a man's life gives him no relief from trouble.  
 What joy is there in a long file of days,  
 Edging you forward toward the goal of death,  
 Then back again a little? I wouldn't give much for a man  
 Who warms himself with the comfort of vain hopes.  
 Let a man nobly live or nobly die  
 If he is a nobleman: I have said what I had to say 480

*Chorus*

Ajax, no one could ever call those words  
 Spurious or alien to you. They are your own heart's speech  
 Pause, though, a moment; put aside these thoughts;  
 And give your friends a chance to win you over.

*Tecmessa*

Ajax, my master, life knows no harder thing  
 Than to be at the mercy of compelling fortune.  
 I, for example, was born of a free father;  
 If any man in Phrygia was lordly and prosperous, he was.  
 Now I'm a slave Such, it seems, was the gods' will,  
 And the will of your strong hand. But since I've come 490  
 To share your bed with you, my thoughts are loyal  
 To you and yours And I beg you  
 In the holy name of Zeus who guards your hearth-fire,  
 And by your bed, in which you have known peace with me,  
 Don't give me up to hear the harsh speech



Of your enemies and bow to it, their bondslave.  
 For this is certain: the day you die  
 And by your death desert me, that same day  
 Will see me outraged too, forcibly dragged  
 By the Greeks, together with your boy, to lead a slave's life.  
 And then some one of the lord class, 500  
 With a lashing word, will make his hateful comment:  
 "There she is, Ajax' woman;  
 He was the greatest man in the whole army.  
 How enviable her life was then, and now how slavish!"  
 Some speech in that style. And my ill fate  
 Will be driving me before it, but these words  
 Will be a reproach to you and all your race.  
 Ajax, revere your father; do not leave him  
 In the misery of his old age—and your mother,  
 Shareholder in many years, revere her too!  
 She prays the gods for your safe return, how often!  
 And last, dear lord, show pity to your child. 510  
 Robbed of his infant nurture, reft of you,  
 To live his life out under the rule of guardians  
 Not kind nor kindred—what a wretchedness  
 You by your death will deal to him and me!  
 And I no longer have anywhere to look for help,  
 If not to you. My country was destroyed  
 Utterly by your spear, and another fate  
 Brought down my mother and my father too,  
 To dwell in death with Hades. Then what fatherland  
 Shall I ever have but you? Or what prosperity?  
 You are my only safety. O my lord,  
 Remember even me. A man ought to remember 520  
 If he has experienced any gentle thing.  
 Kindness it is that brings forth kindness always.  
 But when a man forgets good done to him  
 And the recollection of it slips away,  
 How shall I any longer call him noble?

*Chorus*

Ajax, I wish you could have pity in your heart  
As I do For then you might approve her words.

*Ajax*

Well, she can certainly count on my approval  
If only she sets her mind to do as I bid her.

*Tecmessa*

Dearest Ajax, I will be all obedience.

*Ajax*

Then bring me my child and let me see him.

530

*Tecmessa*

It was only because of my fears that I removed him

*Ajax*

In all this terrible business? Or do I understand you?

*Tecmessa*

For fear the poor little one might come in your way and be killed.

*Ajax*

Yes, that would have been worthy of my evil genius

*Tecmessa*

At all events I took care that it shouldn't happen.

*Ajax*

You did well and deserve credit for your foresight

*Tecmessa*

Is there anything, then, you want me to do for you?

*Ajax*

Yes. Let me speak to my boy and see his face.

*Tecmessa*

He's not far off The servants are looking after him.

*Ajax*

Why doesn't he come at once, then?

540

*Tecmessa*

Eurysaces! Your father is calling for you.

(*To one of the servants inside.*)

You bring him! you have him by the hand.

*Ajax*

Is he coming? Doesn't he hear your words?

(*Enter, from the side door, a servant leading  
Eurysaces by the hand.*)

*Tecmessa*

Here he is. See, the servant's bringing him.

*Ajax*

Lift him up, lift him to me He won't be frightened,

Even by seeing this fresh-butchered gore,

Not if he really is my son Break in

The colt straight off to his father's rugged ways,

Train him to have a nature like his sire.

My boy, have better luck than your father had,

550

Be like him in all else; and you will not be base.

You know, even now I somewhat envy you:

You have no sense of all this misery.

Not knowing anything's the sweetest life—

Ignorance is an evil free from pain—

Till the time comes when you learn of joy and grief.

And when you come to that,

Then you must show your father's enemies

What sort of a man you are, and what man's son.

Till then feed on light breezes, basking

In the tenderness of your young life, giving your mother joy.

For rest assured, the Greeks will not offer you outrage

560

Or hatefully insult you, even when we are parted.

I leave you a strong warden at the door,

Teucer He will protect and rear you up

And stunt you nothing, even though now he's far away,

Gone on a distant raid in enemy country.

—You, men at arms and seafarers, my followers,

I enjoin this act of kindness on you all:

Pass on my command to Teucer, bid him take  
My boy here to my home, present him  
To Telamon and my mother, Eriboea,  
And let him tend and nourish their old age  
With constancy, till at the last they find  
Their dark apartments with the god below.  
As for my arms—

570

I say no arbiter of the Greeks shall set them  
As a prize of competition for the army,  
Certainly my destroyer shall not. Rather  
You, my boy, take from me this great weapon  
From which you have your name, Eurysaces;  
Hold and direct it by its stalwart strap,  
This sevenfold-oxhide-thick unbreachable shield.  
The rest of my armor shall be buried with me.  
But there's enough Come, take the child quickly;  
Close up the house And let there be no wailing  
Here out of doors Lord, what a plaintive creature  
Womankind is! (*He goes inside*) Make fast, and hurry!  
No good physician quavers incantations  
When the malady he's treating needs the knife.

580

*Chorus*

I'm terrified by your eager urgency,  
And take no comfort in your whetted tongue.

*Tecmessa*

Ajax, my lord, what is your mind bent upon?

*Ajax*

Don't probe and question! It becomes you to submit.

*Tecmessa*

How my heart falters! Ajax, by your child  
And by the gods I beg you, don't be our betrayer!

*Ajax*

You're growing tedious Don't you know by now  
That I owe the gods no service any more?

590

*messa*

What impious words!

*ix*

Reprove those who hear you.

*cmessa*

And will you not relent?

*ax*

You've said too much already.

*cmessa*

My lord, it is my fear that speaks!

*jax (to the servants)*

Shut the doors at once!

*ecmessa*

In the gods' name, soften!

*ijax*

You have a foolish thought

If you think at this late date to school my nature.

*(The doors are shut; Tecmessa remains quietly crouching  
or kneeling beside them. A servant stands behind her,  
holding Eurysaces by the hand)*

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

O splendid Salamis, my heart recalls,  
Blest island, where you lie  
At peace in the surf's pounding,  
Radiant in all men's sight and prized forever  
But Time has grown old since I  
Have kept this wretched bivouac under Ida,  
Losing count of the months' lapse,  
Feeling the slow abrasion;  
And dark is my thought's forecast:  
Shall I win, shall I yet come, shall my coming be  
To the somber and detested house of Death?

600

*Antistrophe*

And now wretchedly I must face  
A new bout, for Ajax, ill to cure, 610  
Sits by, and holy madness is his consort.  
You sent him forth, fair island, in a time long past,  
A warrior brilliant among warriors Now  
He keeps his thoughts' flock in loneliness  
And grieves his friends.  
And the works of war that once his strong hands did  
Are fallen, fallen,  
Undear, unfriended by the friendless kings. 620

*Strophe*

I think, too,  
Of his mother, with the white of age upon her:  
Surely when the news of his mind's ravage  
Is brought to her (O lamentable! lamentable!)  
Not like the poor lorn nightingale  
In a low sob will she utter her heart's anguish,  
But high, rending strains will break from her, 630  
The breast be beaten, and the tresses torn.

*Antistrophe*

Better if he  
Were hidden in Hades, now his mind is gone;  
For though his proud lineage  
Excelled his warlike peers,  
He keeps no more the steady heart we knew,  
But ranges in extravagant madness Wretched father! 640  
What a hard word you must hear! Calamity  
Fallen upon your son, such as no other  
Of all his race has borne, but only he.

*(Enter Ajax from the tent with a sword in his hand.)*

*Ajax*

Strangely the long and countless drift of time  
Brings all things forth from darkness into light,  
Then covers them once more. Nothing so marvelous

That man can say it surely will not be—  
 Strong oath and iron intent come crashing down.  
 My mood, which just before was strong and rigid, 650  
 No dipped sword more so, now has lost its edge—  
 My speech is womanish for this woman's sake;  
 And pity touches me for wife and child,  
 Widowed and lost among my enemies.  
 But now I'm going to the bathing place  
 And meadows by the sea, to cleanse my stains,  
 In hope the goddess' wrath may pass from me  
 And when I've found a place that's quite deserted,  
 I'll dig in the ground, and hide this sword of mine,  
 Hatefulest of weapons, out of sight May Darkness  
 And Hades, God of Death, hold it in their safe keeping. 660  
 For never, since I took it as a gift  
 Which Hector, my great enemy, gave to me,  
 Have I known any kindness from the Greeks  
 I think the ancient proverb speaks the truth:  
 An enemy's gift is ruinous and no gift.  
 Well, then,  
 From now on this will be my rule: Give way  
 To Heaven, and bow before the sons of Atreus.  
 They are our rulers, they must be obeyed.  
 I must give way, as all dread strengths give way,  
 In turn and deference. Winter's hard-packed snow  
 Cedes to the fruitful summer; stubborn night 670  
 At last removes, for day's white steeds to shine.  
 The dread blast of the gale slackens and gives  
 Peace to the sounding sea; and Sleep, strong jailer,  
 In time yields up his captive. Shall not I  
 Learn place and wisdom? Have I not learned this,  
 Only so much to hate my enemy  
 As though he might again become my friend,  
 And so much good to wish to do my friend, 680  
 As knowing he may yet become my foe?  
 Most men have found friendship a treacherous harbor.

Enough: this will be well

You, my wife, go in  
And fervently and continually pray the gods  
To grant fulfilment of my soul's desire.  
And you, my friends, heed my instructions too,  
And when he comes, deliver this to Teucer:  
Let him take care for me and thought for you  
Now I am going where my way must go,  
Do as I bid you, and you yet may hear  
That I, though wretched now, have found my safety

690

(*Ajax goes out through the wing; Tecmessa  
and Eurysaces go into the tent*)

*Chorus*

## Strophe

I shudder and thrill with joy,  
I leap and take wings—Lord Pan!  
Come to me over the sea  
From your huge, snow-buffeted mountain,  
From the long, harsh ridge of Cyllênê  
I would dance, I am bent upon dancing!  
Teach me (you are the gods' teacher  
And yourself you need no teacher)  
Wild, high, excited dances, Mysian, Cnosian—  
I would dance, I am bent upon dancing!  
And over the open sea  
Come to me in the clear light,  
Apollo, Lord of Delos—  
Be with me in kindness always.

700

## Antistrophe

The harsh god has taken  
His siege of grief from our eyes.  
(I exult with love and with joy!)

Once again, Zeus,  
King of the bright air, your perfect daylight  
May bathe our skimming seacraft in its whiteness.



Ajax forgets his pain,  
And now, with holy rite and due observance,  
Once more knows reverent thoughts.  
Great Time makes all things dim,  
And nothing seems beyond the verge of speech,  
Since Ajax has resolved  
(Amazing!) his heart's fierceness and his stern  
Strife with the sons of Atreus.

710

(Enter a Messenger.)

*Messenger*

Friends, I would deliver this news first to you:  
Teucer has just come back from rugged Mysia  
No sooner did he reach headquarters than  
The whole Greek army gathered to abuse him.  
They'd seen him coming quite a long way off  
And, when he arrived, stood around him in a circle,  
Jabbing at him with jeers from every side  
Called him the brother of a lunatic  
And traitor to the army; threatened him  
With stoning to a torn and bloody death.  
So far they went that eager fingers then  
Had plucked forth swords from scabbards, but the thing,  
Just as it hurried toward its uttermost,  
Grew quiet at the elders' peaceful words  
But where is Ajax? I must speak my charge,  
And cannot do it but to my lord himself.

720

730

*Chorus*

He is not here He went away just now;  
His heart is changed, and bends to bear the yoke  
Of a changed purpose.

*Messenger*

May God help him then!  
Perhaps the man that sent me was too slow  
In sending, or I lingered on the way

*Chorus*

What is so urgent? Why do you think you're late?

740

*Messenger*

Teucer declared the man should not go out,  
But stay indoors, till he himself arrives.

*Chorus*

He *has* gone out, though—seeking his truest good.  
He wants to be relieved of the gods' anger.

*Messenger*

A very foolish and misguided thought,  
If Calchas can foresee events at all!

*Chorus*

What are you saying? What can you know of it?

*Messenger*

This much I know—I happened to be near:  
For Calchas rose and left the kingly circle  
And came to speak with Teucer privately  
Without the Atridae; gently he placed his hand  
In Teucer's own, and urged and pled with him  
To use all shifts to keep his brother safe  
Under his tent-roof, and confine him there  
Throughout the length of this now present day,  
If ever he wished to see him alive again.  
Only for this one day, the prophet said,  
Will the Goddess Athena vex him with her anger.  
"Wherever men forget their mere man's nature,  
Thinking a thought too high, they have no use  
Of their huge bulk and boldness, but they fall  
On most untoward disasters sent by Heaven.  
Ajax, even when he first set out from home,  
Proved himself foolish, when his father gave him  
His good advice at parting. 'Child,' he said,  
'Resolve to win, but always with God's help.'  
But Ajax answered with a senseless boast:  
'Father, with God's help even a worthless man  
Could triumph. I propose, without that help,  
To win my prize of fame.' In such a spirit

750

760

He boasted And when once Athena stood  
 Beside him in the fight, urging him on  
 To strike the enemy with his deadly hand,  
 He answered then, that second time, with words  
 To shudder at, not speak: 'Goddess,' he said,  
 'Go stand beside the other Greeks, help them.  
 For where I bide, no enemy will break through'  
 These were the graceless words which won for him  
 The goddess' wrath, they kept no human measure.  
 But if he lives this day out, then perhaps,  
 With God's help, we may be his saviors still "

This was the seer's message. Teucer rose  
 At once and sent me off, bearing you these  
 Instructions, with strict charge to keep them But  
 If Ajax has deprived me of my hope,  
 His life is done. Else Calchas has no art.

770

780

*Chorus*

Tecmessa, I think you were born for every misery.  
 Come and attend to this man's fearful story.

*(As though to himself.)*

The razor grazes near, and I feel no comfort.

*(Enter Tecmessa, carrying Eurysaces.)*

*Tecmessa*

I have only just found respite from that other  
 Siege of calamities. What new alarm is this?

*Chorus*

Listen to the message this man has brought.  
 It concerns Ajax, and it sounds grim.

790

*Tecmessa*

Alas, what is your message? Not that we're ruined?

*Messenger*

As to your own case, I can't say. But if Ajax  
 Has left his tent, there is not much hope for him.

*Tecmessa*

But he *has* gone out. I tremble in suspense  
To know your meaning.

*Messenger*

Teucer sends strict directions that Ajax  
Must be kept under the cover of his tent  
And not permitted to go out alone.

*Tecmessa*

But where *is* Teucer? And why does he say this?

*Messenger*

He has just returned. And he apprehends  
That Ajax' going out will be his ruin.

*Tecmessa*

Heaven help us! Who was the man that told him this?

800

*Messenger*

Calchas the prophet. He warned us to be on our guard  
All day, for it brings him either life or death.

*Tecmessa*

Alas, friends, stand between me and my doom!  
Hurry, some of you, and bring Teucer quickly;  
The rest divide—let one group search the eastward  
And one the westward bendings of the shore,  
To trace his dangerous path. I can see now  
That I have been beguiled of his intent  
And exiled from his kindness which I knew.  
But oh! my child, what shall I do? Not stay,  
But join the search as far as my strength supports me  
Come, let's be at the work! No time to linger,  
If we aim to save a man that's bent on death.

810

*Chorus*

I am ready. More than my words shall show it.  
You'll find me swift of foot and prompt in action.

*(Tecmessa leaves Eurysaces with the attendants and goes hurriedly out. Meanwhile, the Chorus divides into two equal semichoruses and exits through the side entrances )*

SCENE: *An empty place by the seashore. No scenery need be indicated except some bushes, behind which Ajax' body will fall. His preparations, though, should be largely visible to the audience Enter Ajax.*

*Ajax (carefully fixes the sword in place, tamps down the ground, and feels the edge of the blade)*

He's firm in the ground, my Slayer. And his cut  
 (If I have time even for this reflection)  
 Should now be deadliest. For, first, the sword  
 Was Hector's gift, a token of guest-friendship,  
 And he of all guest-friends my bitterest foe;  
 Here, too, it stands, lodged in this hostile ground  
 Of Troy, its edge made new with iron-devouring stone.  
 And, last, I've propped it, so, with careful handling,  
 To help me soon and kindly to my death.  
 This preparation I have made. And now,  
 Making my invocation, as is right,  
 I call first, Zeus, on you. Grant me a little thing:  
 Rouse up some messenger for me, to bear  
 The news of my disaster first to Teucer,  
 So that he first may gently lift me up  
 When I have fallen on this reeking sword.  
 I would not have some enemy spy me out  
 And cast me forth, a prize for birds and dogs.  
 Grant me, O Zeus, this one thing. And do you,  
 Hermes, Conductor to the Nether World,  
 Waft me with one swift unconvulsive leap  
 Upon this piercing blade. And you, Dread Furies—  
 You who are ever maidens and do watch  
 Above all fates and sufferings of men—

820

830

Come with long strides, my helpers, mark my end,  
 How Atreus' sons have brought me to my ruin,  
 And sweep upon them for their ruin too.  
 They see me falling now by my own hand, 840  
 So too by loved and kindred hand may they!  
 Go, swift and punishing Erinyes,  
 Taste the whole army's blood, and spare them nothing.  
 And you that drive your chariot up the steep  
 Of Heaven, Lord Helios—when you next shall see  
 My own dear country, check your golden reins,  
 And bring the tale of my distressful death  
 To my old father and to her that nursed me.  
 Poor mother! When she hears this wretched word, 850  
 How her grief's note will quaver through the town!  
 But I must leave this idle vein of weeping  
 And set about my business with some speed.  
 Strong God of Death, attend me now and come.  
 And yet I shall converse with you hereafter  
 And know you in the world below. But you,  
 Sweet gleam of daylight now before my eyes,  
 And Sun-God, splendid charioteer, I greet you  
 For this last time and never any more.  
 O radiance, O my home and hallowed ground  
 Of Salamis, and my father's hearth, farewell! 860  
 And glorious Athens, and my peers and kin  
 Nurtured with me, and here all springs and streams,  
 My nurses, you that wet the plains of Troy,  
 Farewell! This last word Ajax gives to you;  
 The rest he keeps, to speak among the dead.

*(He falls on the sword and collapses behind the bushes.  
 Enter, from one wing, the first of the two divisions  
 of the Chorus )*

*First Semichorus*

Toil breeds toil upon toil,  
 Where, where have I not searched?

No place knows that I share its secret.

Listen! What noise was that?

870

*(Enter, from the other wing, the other division  
of the Chorus.)*

*Second Semichorus*

Only us, your shipmates.

*First Semichorus*

What luck?

*Second Semichorus*

From the ships to westward we've scanned all the ground.

*First Semichorus*

And discovered . . . ?

*Second Semichorus*

Labor enough; no trace of him we seek.

*First Semichorus*

Nor yet on the path to eastward, facing the sunrise:

No sign of him at all.

*(The two halves of the Chorus unite.)*

*Chorus*

What struggling fisherman

Of those that seek their haul

With labor in the hours of sleep;

880

What nymph of mountain side

Or seaward-rolling river

Might see the grim man

Wandering somewhere and cry out to me?

I wish one would! For surely

It's a hard thing that I must range and plod,

With never a fair course

To bring me near my goal;

But I cannot see the afflicted man's faint trace.

890

*(Tecmessa has entered from the wing and reached the  
place where Ajax has fallen. She is still invisible,  
though, being masked by the bushes.)*

*Tecmessa*

Oh! No! No!

*Chorus*

Whose is that harsh cry bursting from the copse?

*Tecmessa*

Oh! Oh!

*Chorus*

It is she, I see her now, the poor captive wife,  
Tecmessa. She is lost in lamentation

*Tecmessa*

Friends, I am ruined, overwhelmed, undone.

*Chorus*

What is the matter?

*Tecmessa*

Here at my feet lies Ajax, newly slain  
His fallen body enfolds and hides the sword.

*Chorus*

Oh, now I shall not win home!  
You have dealt me death, my lord,  
Your poor unhappy shipmate  
—And I feel for her, poor wretched one, poor wife!

900

*Tecmessa*

He is dead, dead We can only weep for him.

*Chorus*

Whose hand helped him to his fate?

*Tecmessa*

His own hand and act It's plain to see.  
This blade, packed in the ground,  
On which he fell, declares it.

*Chorus*

How blind I was! And you bled alone, your friends not guarding!  
I was all deaf and stupid, totally heedless.

910



Let me see him,  
Rugged and ill-starred Ajax, where he lies.

*Tecmessa*

You *must* not see him! I will cover him  
With this enfolding garment from all sight

*(She removes her own mantle, which should be ample  
and rectangular, and covers him.)*

Surely no one who loved him could endure  
To see the foam at his nostrils and the spout  
Of darkening blood from the wound his own hand made.  
Alas, what shall I do? Which of your friends  
Will bear you up? Where's Teucer? Oh, may he come in time  
To give fit tendance to his fallen brother!  
Ajax! To be so great, and suffer this!  
Even your enemies, I think, might weep for you.

920

*Chorus*

You were bound, hard spirit,  
Bound in the end (it is clear now)  
To work the term of your luckless  
Life's share of affliction, that vast journey.  
What could they mean but that,  
The groans your fierce heart uttered  
By night and in the sunlight,  
Fraught with hate  
For the sons of Atreus,  
Fraught with a mind for harm?  
That time was to be a great  
Inaugural time of sorrows  
When the strife was set for soldiership  
Over the priceless armor.

930

*Tecmessa*

Oh! The pain of it!

*Chorus*

A noble grief, I know, goes to the heart.

*Tecmessa*

Oh! Oh!

*Chorus*

I don't wonder, lady,  
That you cry out, and again cry out, your grief,  
Deprived so recently of one so dear.

940

*Tecmessa*

You may conjecture that;  
I know and feel it all too certainly.

*Chorus*

That is true.

*Tecmessa*

Poor little one! What a yoke of servitude  
We go to! What hard taskmasters!

*Chorus*

They are ruthless indeed, the two sons of Atreus,  
If they do the unspeakable thing  
You have spoken in your distress:  
God forbid!

*Tecmessa*

Even in what we suffer I see the gods' hand.

950

*Chorus*

Yes, they have given an overload of grief.

*Tecmessa*

I think Pallas, the dreadful goddess, has bred  
This pain, perhaps for her favorite, Odysseus.

*Chorus*

That waiting, laboring man,  
How he insults in his black heart!  
He mocks our madding griefs  
With loud laughter, bitter to bear,  
And the twin kings hear and join him

960

*Tecmessa*

Well, let them laugh their laughter and exult  
In Ajax' downfall They didn't want him living;  
Perhaps, now he is dead, they will yearn for him,  
When the fighting presses. Ignorant men  
Don't know what good they hold in their hands until  
They've flung it away. His death was a bitterer thing to me  
Than sweet to them, but for himself a happiness.  
For he won his great desire, the death he looked for.  
Why should those others mock him any more?  
His death concerns the gods, not them at all.  
Let Odysseus think of this and make his empty insult.  
For them there is no Ajax; mine is gone,  
But not the grief and loss he leaves to me.

970

*(Teucer is heard in the wing)*

*Teucer*

O God! God!

*Chorus*

Hush! For I think it's Teucer's voice I hear,  
And his cry goes straight to the mark of this disaster.

*(Teucer enters.)*

*Teucer*

O my dear brother Ajax, have you come  
To grief, as this strong rumor says you have?

*Chorus*

He is dead, Teucer Know the simple truth.

*Teucer*

Then my ill-luck is bearing heavily down!

980

*Chorus*

It is true.

*Teucer*

Miserable!

*Chorus*

You may well groan.

*Teucer*

Rash and calamitous!

*Chorus*

Yes, Teucer.

*Teucer*

The grief comes sharp. But where  
Is the little one? Where in the whole width  
Of Troyland shall I look for him?

*Chorus*

He is alone

By the tents.

*Teucer (to Tecmessa)*

Go quickly, then,  
Quickly, and bring him here. Some enemy else  
May snatch him, as one would a lion-whelp  
Torn from its mother. Hurry and lose no time!  
When a man lies dead and cannot help himself,  
The world delights to mock and injure him.

*(Exit Tecmessa.)*

*Chorus*

Teucer, that was his last command to you,  
To take care for his child, as you are doing.

990

*Teucer*

This sight of all sights that my eyes have seen  
To me is harshest, and no other road,  
Of all my feet have taken, so has grieved  
My soul as this, dear Ajax, which I took  
In haste to seek the truth and trace it home  
When first I heard the news of your disaster.  
It was sharp news, and sped through all the army  
As if some God had sent it: you were dead.  
And when I heard it, still a long way off,

1000

I groaned with inward misery, now I see,  
It is true, and it destroys me.

Ah, me!

Come and uncover, let me see the worst

*(He uncovers the face of Ajax.)*

Hard, bitter countenance, lines of fierce resolve,

How can I look at you? Oh, what a crop

Of anguish you have sown for me in death!

Where can I go? Who ever will receive me,

Now I have failed to help you in your need?

Old Telamon is your father, and mine too:

No doubt he'll welcome me and beam on me

When I come home without you Very likely!

1010

He's not much given to smiling, even when things go well

What will he not say? What reproach will he spare me?

*Bastard and gotten by the war-spear, coward,*

*Nerveless deserter and abandoner—*

Of you, dear Ajax! or perhaps suggest

I did it out of treachery, so that I

Might get your house and kingship by your death.

These will be that harsh old man's reproaches:

Age makes him morose and stirs him up

To causeless anger. In the end I'll be

Cast into exile and denied my country,

A slave in his account and not a freeman.

1020

At home those are my expectations; here in Troy

My enemies are numerous, my help small

Such are the benefits your death has brought me.

What shall I do? How shall I disengage you,

Brother, from off this bitter, gleaming spike,

Your murderer, by whose cut you gasped your life out?

Do you see how in time Hector, though dead,

Was to destroy you? Only consider this

Amazing thing, the fortunes of two men:

The girdle Hector had as Ajax' gift

Was that which dragged him from the chariot rails,

1030

Clamping his flesh and grating him until  
He swooned in death, this sword Hector gave Ajax,  
Who perished on it with a death-fraught fall.  
Did not a Fury beat this weapon out?  
And was it not Aidoneus, that grim craftsman,  
Who made that other one? In my opinion,  
This was the gods' contrivance, like all other  
Destinies of men, for the gods weave them all;  
But if anyone should find my thought at fault,  
Let him keep his opinion, and I mine

*Chorus*

Cut short your speech, and quickly consider  
How best to hide him in some sort of grave,  
And what you must say next. I see a man  
Coming, our enemy, to laugh, I think,  
Like one who means us harm, at our misfortunes.

1040

*Teucer*

Which chief of the army is it that you see?

*Chorus*

Menelaus, the one we made this voyage to gratify.

*Teucer*

I see him now.  
At closer range he's not hard to distinguish.

*(Enter Menelaus, attended by two heralds.)*

*Menelaus*

You, there! I tell you not to lift that corpse  
Nor bury it, but leave it where it is

*Teucer*

And why the expense of this somewhat grand announcement?

*Menelaus*

My pleasure, and the High Command's decree.

1050

*Teucer*

Perhaps you'd care to give some justification for it.

*Menelaus*

Listen, then.

When we brought Ajax here from Greece,  
 We thought he would be our ally and our friend:  
 On trial we've found him worse than any Trojan—  
 Plotting a murderous blow at the whole army,  
 A night attack, to nail us with his spear.  
 And unless some god had smothered that attempt,  
 We should have met the end that he has met,  
 Done to a helpless, miserable death,  
 And he be living still But God changed  
 His criminal heart to fall on sheep and cattle.  
 Therefore I say, no man exists on earth  
 Who shall have the power to give him burial,  
 But he shall be tossed forth  
 Somewhere on the pale sand, to feed the sea birds.  
 There it is, and I want no fire-breathing.  
 Maybe we couldn't rule him while he lived;  
 But now he is dead, we most assuredly will,  
 With a firm directing hand, whether you like it or not.  
 So long as he lived, he never would heed our words,  
 Never. And yet it's a poor common soldier  
 That feels no duty to obey his betters.  
 Laws will never be rightly kept in a city  
 That knows no fear or reverence, and no army  
 Without its shield of fear can be well governed.  
 And even if a man rears a huge frame,  
 He had better know how small a cause can throw him.  
 When a man is moved by wholesome fear and shame,  
 You may know that combination makes for safety;  
 But insubordination and the rule  
 Of do-as-you-like invariably, mark my words,  
 Sooner or later drive a city on  
 Before the gale into the sea's gulf.  
 Enact, I say, some salutary fear:  
 And let's not think we can do just what we please,

1060

1070

1080

« A J A X »

And then, when we grow vexatious, pay no fees.  
There's turnabout in these things A while ago  
He was the hot aggressor; now it's I  
Who entertain large ideas. And I give you notice,  
Don't bury him. For you may find, if you do,  
That you're apt to take a tombward fall yourself.

1090

*Chorus*

Menelaus, these are fine principles you've upreared;  
Don't shame them now by outrage to the dead

*Teucer*

Friends, I never shall be amazed again  
To see a man of humble birth go wrong,  
When those who claim the noblest birth of all  
Utter such wrongful speech as you've just heard.  
Come, tell me again: you say you brought this man  
Here for the Greeks as an ally *you* enlisted?  
Didn't he make the voyage here on his own,  
As his own master? How, then, are you his general?  
What gives you title to command his people,  
Who followed him from home? King of Sparta  
You came, no general over us. You've no more claim  
To marshal him than he has to drill you.  
Why, you sailed here in a subordinate place,  
Not lord of all, that you should ever claim  
The right to captain Ajax! Rule your own;  
Chastise their arrogant speech. But Ajax,  
In spite of your prohibitions and your brother's,  
I shall lay in his tomb, reverently and justly,  
Regardless of your frowns. It wasn't at all  
For your wife's sake he made the expedition,  
Like some poor, toiling subject; but for the oaths  
Which he had sworn—no service due to you  
He took no stock of nobodies. Think this over,  
And come then with more heralds at your back,

1100

1110



And maybe the general too. But I'll take no notice  
Of your pother, so long as you're what you are.

*Chorus*

I can't approve such bold speech in misfortune;  
Harsh words, however just they are, still rankle.

*Menelaus*

This bowman seems to think quite well of himself

1120

*Teucer*

My archery is no contemptible science.

*Menelaus*

Think how he'd boast if he wore a warrior's armor!

*Teucer*

I'm a match light-armed for you in bronze, I think.

*Menelaus*

That tongue of yours! What a fierce heart it fosters!

*Teucer*

A man may have some boldness in the right

*Menelaus*

So! It was right he should kill me and then prosper!

*Teucer*

Kill? Truly *this* is a miracle,  
If you've been killed and still are living!

*Menelaus*

A god saved me, I was dead in *his* intention.

*Teucer*

Well, don't affront the gods, if the gods have saved you.

*Menelaus*

Could it be that I should fail to revere the gods' laws?

1130

*Teucer*

Yes, if you intervene  
To interrupt the burial of the dead.

*Menelaus*

Of my own enemies! *They* must not be buried.

*Teucer*

Ajax opposed you, then, on the field of battle?

*Menelaus*

He hated me, as I did him. You knew that well.

*Teucer*

There was some reason for it:

You were found out procuring fraudulent votes.

*Menelaus*

Charge his defeat to the judges, not to me.

*Teucer*

You have a gift for suave and stealthy villainy.

*Menelaus*

Someone is going to smart for that speech.

*Teucer*

No worse, I judge, than the smart I shall inflict.

*Menelaus*

I tell you just one thing This man must not be buried.

1140

*Teucer*

And this shall be your answer. He shall be  
Buried at once.

*Menelaus*

I observed a man once of fast and saucy speech  
Who had pressed sailors to make a voyage in a storm;  
When the weather got really rough, you couldn't hear  
Him piping anywhere: he hid himself in his cloak,  
And anybody aboard could step on him at will.  
And very possibly you and your reckless speech—  
If a big whistling storm should suddenly come  
Out of a little cloud—your clamorous uproar  
Might be quenched in a very similar fashion.

*Teucer*

And I once saw a man inflated with foolishness,  
Who insulted the misfortunes of his neighbors.  
And another man, closely resembling me,

1150

Quite like me in temperament, gave him a straight look  
 And said to him, "Man, don't outrage the dead.  
 You certainly shall regret it if you do."  
 That was the advice he gave that worthless man.  
 I see him now, and he is, it seems to me,  
 You, and nobody else. Am I speaking in riddles?

*Menelaus*

I'm leaving. I shall only look absurd  
 To stay and chide you, when I might use force.

1160

*(Exit.)*

*Teucer*

Go, then. It does me little credit, either,  
 To listen to an empty man's loud talk.

*Chorus*

A great and wrathful contest is shaping.  
 Teucer, bestir yourself. Find him,  
 As quickly as you can, some hollow  
 Cavity in the earth, that shall become  
 His dank, capacious tomb, a signal  
 Reminder of him to men in after time.

*Teucer*

Here, just in time for that, his wife and child  
 Are coming, to perform with kindred touch  
 The service due his pitiable body.

1170

*(Enter Tecmessa with Eurysaces.)*

Come, little one, kneel down, as suppliants do,  
 Grasp your father, the creator of your life.  
 Hold in your hands this lock of mine

*(Cuts it, and puts it in the boy's hand.)*  
 and hers,

*(Cuts it, etc.)*

And this, a third, your own

*(Puts his hand on the boy's head and separates the lock  
 in readiness to cut it.)*

—a suppliant's treasure  
Keep your station, and make your supplication.  
And if anyone in the army tries to wrest you  
Forcibly from this corpse, may his corpse be  
Thrown out unburied from his land and home,  
Wretchedly, as he is a wretch, cut off  
At the root with all his race, even as I  
Have cut this lock of hair.

(*Cuts it and gives it to Eurysaces.*)

Take it, dear child, and guard it, and let no one  
Remove you, but cling fast, inclining over him.

1180

(*To the Chorus*)

And you, don't huddle near like a crowd of women,  
Instead of the men you are, but rally round  
And help, till I come back, having provided  
A tomb for him, though all the world gainsay me

(*Exit Teucer*)

*Chorus*

*Strophe*

Which year, I wonder, shall be my long toil's last,  
And when shall the battered count of them all be full?  
They bring upon me a ceaseless curse of spear-spied  
Trouble over the length and breadth of Troy,  
A grief and a shame to all Greek men.

1190

*Antistrophe*

Whoever it was that first revealed to Hellas  
Their common scourge, detested arms and war,  
I curse him. Would the large air first had taken him  
Or else the impartial house of Death. Generations  
Of toil be made for us. Ah,  
There indeed was a harrier of men!

*Strophe*

It was he that denied my share  
In the sweet companionship

1200

Of garland and deep cup;  
 And miserly he grudged me  
 The flute's soft lovely clamor  
 And a pleasant bed in the night,  
 And love, love he abridged and interdicted.  
 Ah, me! I languish, so None cares  
 That my locks are damp with the thick continual dew  
 Which is all my thought of Troy.

1210

*Antistrophe*

And he, valorous Ajax,  
 Who was once my ward and cover  
 From every flying shaft  
 And dread in the hours of night,  
 Now is handed over to his harsh daemon  
 What joy, then, is left to me?  
 Oh, if somehow I might find myself  
 Rounding a wood-topped bulwark of the sea,  
 Sunium's level tip where the surf washes,  
 And make my salutation  
 To holy Athens!

1220

(*Enter Teucer hastily.*)

*Teucer*

I hurried back when I saw the commander-in-chief,  
 Agamemnon, approaching. And here he is;  
 I think he will give his hateful lips full freedom.

(*Enter Agamemnon with retinue*)

*Agamemnon*

You, there! Are you the one they tell me of,  
 Who has made bold to yawp these powerful speeches,  
 Unpunished, so far, against me? You,  
 The son of a captive slave-woman! What if your mother  
 Had been a princess? *Then* I think you'd strut,  
 Then you'd talk big! Why, as it is, being  
 Nothing yourself, you have risen up to protect  
 That man who now is nothing, and have sworn  
 That I am not the general nor the admiral

1230

Either of the Achaeans or of you,  
 Since Ajax, as you say, came under his own command!  
 These are quite some taunts to hear from a slave.  
 And what is the man on whose behalf you've bawled  
 These very ambitious claims? Where did he go,  
 Or stand in battle, where I did not too?  
 Was he the one real man in the whole Greek army? 1240  
 Ah! that contest for Achilles' armor!  
 We shall regret the day we published it  
 If every moment we must be defamed  
 And slandered by this Teucer, if you please!  
 Who can't accept the court's majority verdict,  
 Defeated as he is, or yield to it,  
 No! but you losers pelt us still with slanders,  
 And seek to wound us with your crafty plots.  
 Yet where such reckless courses have their head,  
 No law can stand unshaken, not when we  
 Must shove the lawful victors from their place,  
 And give precedence to the ranks behind.  
 This must be curbed. It's not a man's great frame 1250  
 Or breadth of shoulders makes his manhood count:  
 A man of sense has always the advantage.  
 A very little whip can serve to guide  
 A hulking ox straight forward on his road.  
 And I fancy something of that medicine  
 Is coming for you, unless you get some sense!  
 'That man is dead, now—just a shadow;  
 And yet you seem to count on *him* to protect  
 Your sauciness! I say, learn moderation!  
 Think of your slave's birth; bring someone else, 1260  
 A freeman, here to plead your case before me.  
 I'm disinclined to hear more words from you,  
 Being not much versed in your barbarian speech.

*Chorus*

I wish you both might learn a moderate mind!  
 That is the best I have to say to you.



To drown among the fishes of the deep.  
These are your origins. Can you censure mine?  
Telamon was my father, and he won  
My mother as his valorous prize of war. 1300  
She was a princess by her birth, the child  
Of King Laomedon, and Heracles  
Distinguished her to be my father's gift.  
Two royal races gave me to the world.  
How shall I shame my kin if I defend them  
In their adversity, when you with shameless words  
Would fling them out unburied? Listen to this:  
If you should venture to cast Ajax out,  
You must cast out the three of us as well,  
Together in one heap with him. I make my choice  
To stand in public and to die for him, 1310  
Rather than for your wife—or was it your brother's wife?  
So! Think of your own case, and not merely mine;  
For if you vex me, you may wish you had been  
A coward, rather than too bold with me.

*(Enter Odysseus.)*

*Chorus*

You arrive, my lord Odysseus, just in time,  
If you have come to make not strife but peace.

*Odysseus*

What is this, gentlemen? For quite some distance  
I could hear the sons of Atreus raising their voices  
Over this valiant corpse.

*Agamemnon*

Indeed we were.  
Hadn't we just been hearing infamous language, 1320  
My lord Odysseus, from this fellow here?

*Odysseus*

What language do you complain of? If he gave  
Insult for insult, I could pardon him.



*Agamemnon*

I gave him ugly words:  
It was an ugly wrong he offered me.

*Odysseus*

What did he do to injure you?

*Agamemnon*

He said

He would not leave that corpse unburied, but  
Declared he'd bury it in spite of me.

*Odysseus*

Agamemnon, may a friend speak truth to you,  
And still enjoy your friendship as before?

*Agamemnon*

Speak. I would be foolish to resent your words;  
You are my truest friend in the whole army.

1330

*Odysseus*

Then listen. Don't cast out this brave man's body  
Unburied; don't in the gods' name be so hard.  
Vindictiveness should not so govern you  
As to make you trample on the right. I too  
Found this man hateful once, beyond the rest  
Of all my fellow soldiers, since the time  
I won Achilles' armor. Nevertheless,  
In spite of his enmity, I cannot wish  
To pay him with dishonor, or refuse  
To recognize in him the bravest man  
Of all that came to Troy, except Achilles.  
It would be wrong to do him injury;  
In acting so, you'd not be injuring him—  
Rather the gods' laws. It's a foul thing to hurt  
A valiant man in death, though he *was* your enemy.

1340

*Agamemnon*

Do you, Odysseus, take his part against me?

*Odysseus*

I do.

I hated him while it was fair to hate.

*Agamemnon*

But now he is dead,

Shouldn't you rightly trample on his corpse?

*Odysseus*

Forbear, my lord, to seek unworthy triumphs.

*Agamemnon*

Reverence doesn't come easily to a prince.

1350

*Odysseus*

Regard for a friend's advice is not so difficult

*Agamemnon*

A good man should defer to his superiors.

*Odysseus*

No more, now.

You win the victory when you yield to friends.

*Agamemnon*

Think what a man you're interceding for!

*Odysseus*

My enemy, it's true. But he was noble.

*Agamemnon*

Do you intend pity to a corpse you hate?

*Odysseus*

His greatness weighs more than my hate with me.

*Agamemnon*

Men who act so are changeable and unsteady.

*Odysseus*

Men's minds are given to change in hate and friendship.

*Agamemnon*

Do you, then, recommend such changeable friends?

1360

*Odysseus*

I cannot recommend a rigid spirit.

*Agamemnon*

You'll make me look a coward in this transaction.

*Odysseus*

Generous, though, as all the Greeks will say.

*Agamemnon*

You want me, then, to let this corpse be buried?

*Odysseus*

Yes. For I too shall come to that necessity.

*Agamemnon*

In everything, I see, men labor for themselves.

*Odysseus*

For whom should I rather labor than myself?

*Agamemnon*

Let this be called your doing, and not mine.

*Odysseus*

However you do it, you will deserve praise.

*Agamemnon*

Understand my position. I would do  
This and much more at your request. But as for him,  
Whether on earth or in the underworld,  
I hate him. You may do whatever you wish.

1370

*(Exit Agamemnon with his retinue.)*

*Chorus*

Whoever fails to recognize your wisdom  
And value it, Odysseus, is a fool.

*Odysseus*

And now I have a promise,  
Teucer, to make to you. From now on, I  
Shall be as much your friend as I was once  
Your enemy; and I should like to join

In the burial of your dead—doing with you  
That labor, and omitting none of it,  
Which men should give the noblest of their fellows. 1380

*Teucer*

Noble Odysseus, I can only praise you.  
How greatly you deceived my expectations!  
For though you hated him worst of the Argives,  
You alone came to help, and did not wish,  
Because you lived, to outrage him in death  
That wit-struck general did otherwise—  
He and his noxious brother—and decreed  
That Ajax' corpse should rot without a tomb.  
Therefore, may Zeus who rules on high Olympus,  
Remembering Furies, and avenging Justice 1390  
Destroy them miserably, just as they  
Sought to work outrage and abomination  
On my dear brother's body. Son of Laertes,  
I feel some hesitation at your offer  
And fear I cannot let you touch the corpse:  
That might offend the dead. But bear your part  
In all the rest, and if you wish to bring  
Any others of the army, they shall be welcome.  
I'll see to all the rest. But you, Odysseus,  
Are written in our hearts a nobleman.

*Odysseus*

I could have wished to help. 1400  
But if your preference is otherwise,  
I shall respect your wish and take my leave.

*(Exit Odysseus.)*

*Teucer*

Shoulder the work. Delay  
Has grown too long already.  
Some of you hurry and dig  
The hollow trench; others  
Set the tall cauldron

Amid the surrounding flames  
To ready the holy bath;  
And one troop bring from within the tent  
His glorious suit of armor

Now you, my boy,  
Take hold with your little strength  
Upon your father's body,  
And help in tenderness to lift him up;  
For still the warm conduits  
Spout forth his life's dark force.  
Come now, come, everyone  
That claims to be his friend,  
Begin, proceed, and bear him up,  
This man of perfect excellence—  
No nobler one has ever been than he:  
I speak of Ajax, while he lived.

1410

*(The cortege forms.)*

*Chorus*

What men have seen they know;  
But what shall come hereafter  
No man before the event can see,  
Nor what end waits for him.

1420

*(Exeunt, following the body.)*

# THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*  
*MICHAEL JAMESON*



## INTRODUCTION TO THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

HERACLES was rarely the subject of tragedy, although the most popular hero of Greek mythology. In the theater he was more commonly seen in satyr plays and comedy, and, indeed, this is an indication of his great appeal: he was both god and man, hero and buffoon. At times he appeared as a rescuer to conclude a play in which he was not the central character (in Aeschylus' lost *Prometheus Unbound*, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), but he is not tragic at such times or in the triumphant accomplishment of his labors but at the moment of his solitary defeat. Sophocles and Euripides (in his *Heracles*) each took for his plot one of his two defeats, while ignoring the other—his agony in the poisoned shirt and his homicidal madness against his wife and children. It may be that a single, terrible defeat is necessary to the career of one who is Everyman on a heroic scale and that the poisoned shirt and the madness are "doublets," coming from different versions of his life, concerning two different wives who are only later combined into a single account. Modern research suggests that at least two heroes have merged to form the classical Heracles—the one from Tiryns, the other from Thebes.

Our play contains the first sure reference to Heracles' decision to be burned alive on the pyre, although two divergent traditions about his end are as early as Homer and Hesiod: the one, that, great as he was, even the son of Zeus had to die like any other man; the other, that, after battling Death in various guises, he wins immortality among the gods on Olympus. In later times this latter is the dominant version, and the pyre which destroys his mortal body is the means of his ascent, as in Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*. The story of the pyre cannot be original with Sophocles, for we see it on Attic vases beginning in the early part of the century, and it seems always to have been connected with his becoming a god. Why, then, does

Sophocles avoid all reference to the final resolution of the hero's agony? For Heracles here expects death, and there is not the slightest hint of apotheosis, although it is explicit in the poet's *Philoctetes*. To find an answer, we must see the place of the last scene in the play, assuming that it is an integral part of the whole and not a conventional appendage dictated by mythology.

At the beginning Deianira tells us: "Now he wins through to the end of all his labors / and now I am more than ever afraid" (ll. 36-37), and soon after she reports a prophecy to her son Hyllus: "It said that either he would come to his life's end / or have by now, and for the rest of his time, / a happy life, once he had carried out this task" (ll. 79-81). So the play begins with his wife's anxiety over Heracles' last labors, which will mean the "end" (*telos*) for him and for her, in all its ambiguity; and it is the working-out of this end through a series of revelations constantly coming closer to the full truth that is the action of the play. When Heracles realizes that his end has come and has added further strokes to complete his fate, he closes the action with the order that he be carried out to the pyre to be burned alive: "The true / respite from suffering is this—my final end" (ll. 1255-56). It is this, the discovery of the end of Heracles, that gives the play its unity; for clearly, as the action is not centered on a single character, it does not have the obvious unity of an *Oedipus the King*, nor can it be made into such a play by ignoring either Heracles or Deianira and regarding the remaining character as the true hero. The title we have, avoiding both the principals, should be a warning. And once we allow that the subject of the play is larger than the tragedy of either character and inextricably involves both, we cannot stop short of the total action; to see the play, for instance, as an exposition of the destructive power of love makes a mere "afterpiece" of the last scene, where Heracles learns the truth and acts upon it. Rather, this is the play's climax as well as its conclusion.

The movement of the play as a series of revelations is expressed in action and imagery and is underscored in language through the prominent use in the Greek of the root of *phainein* ("reveal") and of its synonyms and opposites (there is a similar emphasis on *telos*,



"end," and its derivatives). In imagery the contrast of the dark, secret, night-time, and deadly with the bright and clear, with sun, fire, and lightning, culminates in the black, dead enemies (the Hydra's poison, Nessus' gift) that defeat Heracles, and the fire with which in turn he will vanquish them and himself. In action, the expected appearance of Heracles, seemingly assured, is replaced by the silent mystery of Iole and the concealment of Lichas, which, when exposed, are followed by the secrecy of Deianira and of Nessus, revealed to Deianira by the sunlight on the tuft of wool, to the world by the altar fire at Cenaeum; the full revelation of his end to Heracles and of his further decision coincides with a new discovery—the revelation of Hyllus' character as a son worthy of his father.

There is also revelation of the divine agency behind the events. Lichas calls his false story of why Heracles has been absent so long "a tale where it is seen Zeus did the work" (l. 251, *praktōr phanei*); later, when the truth is out, "that silent / handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite / is revealed; this is her work" (ll. 859-61, *phanera . . . ephanē praktōr*); but in the end, when all is seen to agree with Zeus's oracles, "there is / nothing here which is not Zeus" (ll. 1277-78). Through the oracles mentioned at the beginning and near the end, we see that the events leading up to Heracles' defeat are part of the external, inevitable pattern against which the suffering and the actions of the characters must be seen. What happens when Heracles understands this pattern, being in accord with it and yet beyond it, may be the most important part of the play. As far as the characters, or we, can see, the Gods do not care. The meaning and worth of men's actions are what they make of them. We may remember now that "Sophocles claimed he depicted men as they ought to be, Euripides as they are" (Aristotle *Poetics* xxv. 11). If Euripides' characters were closer to reality, Sophocles' own were larger than life, on a heroic scale. How do his characters here fit his own description?

Deianira is easily the more sympathetic character for the modern reader, and many have been tempted to read the play as her tragedy. We see in the beginning her early fear of marriage and of lust, symbolized for her by the monstrous Achelous and then by Nessus, strictly outside the action, they are kept before us by her own and the

chorus' reminiscence. For the end of Heracles' toils means her husband at rest at home and the end of violence and fear. No sooner has all this been realized, as it seems, than violence and lust burst into her own house and her own bed. Here we first see her stature in her kindness and her restraint after she knows who Iole is, in her refusal to hurt or even blame her husband or the girl. (Throughout there may well be a contrast intended with Aeschylus' Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*.) She resorts to a love charm with reluctance and misgivings, for they were unbecoming a great lady and notoriously dangerous. We feel that she was incredibly foolish to trust a gift from Nessus, and soon she thinks so too, and yet we may fail to appreciate how plausible is his magic: the blood of Nessus is to her vile and repulsive, no less so because of the vaguely apprehended effect of the Hydra's poison, but it is precisely from the vile and repulsive that the most potent magic comes. Furthermore, Nessus and the centaurs in general were an incarnation of the erotic (as his attempt on her confirms—the poet's taste seems to have suppressed a peculiarly appropriate ingredient of the charm found in the tradition, the centaur's semen). What better source for a love charm to turn back toward his wife the lust of Heracles, "all desire when the beast's / inducements, all dipped in persuasion, have melted him" (ll. 661-62)? When she is told of the deadly effect of the poison and is cursed by her son, she leaves without a word to justify herself and, re-enacting the central ritual of her life, she makes the bed of Heracles for the last time and kills herself upon it. "How could any woman bring her hands to this?" (l. 898) the Chorus asks, for this is not the hanging of Jocasta or Antigone but the more masculine self-destruction with the sword. A woman, ordinary in her devotion to her marriage and family, shows her extraordinary nobility and strength at the time of her utter disaster.

But, for the Greeks, Heracles has even more of the heroic properties. No man has done more or suffered more. This is not to say that he is likable or, in the sickness of his passion, admirable. Nonetheless, for Deianira and Hyllus, when they think of her losing such a husband, he is "the best of all men" (ll. 177, 811-12). There is no idea of his being punished for his immorality, nor is there any attempt to

soften the impact of his enormous faults. Everything about him is larger than life. When his violent lust is revealed, it is not treated as showing him to be any less of a hero but as evidence of the super-human power of the one foe that has overcome him. Love is seen as a sickness, and the poison, intended as a drug, a remedy, brings about another sickness that can be cured only by suicidal fire. "I ask you to be my healer, / the only physician who can cure my suffering," he begs his son (ll. 1208-9). But this last sickness, the working of the poison, is also conceived of as a beast, the last of all that he has faced (cf. ll. 987, 1009 f., 1028 ff., 1053 ff.), and in the poet's language the other beasts are linked together to form a composite enemy that gains its late revenge. In this play, Heracles is more the beast-slayer than the savior of mankind, and it is in this role that, before he knows the truth, he thinks to punish Deianira. There is no point in reproving him in his ignorance and his horrible pain for this desire. Is any other reaction conceivable for one who knows only what he knows, who is in his pain, and, most important, has led his life? "... alive / I punished the evil and I punish them in death" (ll. 1110-11). Nor need we reprove or gloss over his failure to forgive her when he knows she was innocent. The knowledge that the poison came from Nessus puts everything in a new light. Before, though he prayed for death, he had not, it would seem, admitted to himself that his end had come. Now he knows, and he turns to face it. His end is not to be avoided, but his agony remains, and he treats it as a sickness and as a beast. He had said that this "flowering of madness" was "inexorable" (*akēlētōn*, l. 999, that is, "not to be charmed away"). "Is there any singer of spells, / any craftsman surgeon who can / exorcise this curse, but Zeus?" (ll. 1000-1002). Now, calmly, forcing his will on his son, he applies the measures he had called for in his delirium: the fire and the sword he had used in his purification, purging the earth of beasts (ll. 1013 ff.), he turns on himself, resuming the role he has played all his life.

One cannot doubt that the audience as a whole would have thought beyond to the apotheosis, but, by suppressing all mention of elevation to the Gods through fire and by not motivating the fire

through an oracle, the poet focuses attention on the thing chosen—the fire itself as destroying and purifying—and on the act of choosing. Heracles suffers and acts not with the promise of immortality but with the firm expectation of death, and it is this which gives meaning to his choice. The hero who has wept and wailed, shamefully vanquished by a woman and his dead enemies, returns to the attack, even as Oedipus puts out his eyes, Ajax yields, only to choose suicide, and Antigone, buried alive, kills herself. Heracles tells his “tough soul,” “. . . make an end / of this unwanted, welcome task” (ll. 1259 ff). He makes his end his own.

Appropriately, it is Hyllus who closes the play, for it is through him that we have felt the emotional impact of the long last scene—Heracles, however stunning his actions, is hardly enough like us now for sympathy. When Hyllus accused his mother, we wanted to cry out, “She did not mean to . . .” and almost at once, with her death, his contrition acknowledges, as it were, that we were right. Now the new blows are felt through our sympathy with him. He must restrain his half-crazed father in his ghastly agony, he must brave a murderous anger to tell him the truth, and he must burn, or all but burn, his father alive and marry the woman he thinks of as his parents’ murderer. The dramatic power of the scene needs no comment, but we should also see that thus he ends the chain of violent love by accepting a marriage that appalls him, assuming his father’s mantle where alone his father had not triumphed through courage and endurance.

Finally, what of Zeus and the Gods who have shown so little compassion in “all that’s happened, they / who are called our fathers, who begot us, / can look upon such suffering” (ll. 1266-69)? For Sophocles, in this play at least, the Gods are “the way things are”—the invincible power of love, the predicted and inevitable end; they form the immovable background to human suffering and heroism. The action of the play insists that this is so, that there is what we might call an “inhuman” design, but it is more concerned with what, this being so, Deianira, Heracles, and Hyllus do and suffer and with the way in which, whatever their weakness, they show how men ought to be.

*The Date*

The date of the play is not known. Internal evidence has led to widely different conclusions, but a comparison with certain features of Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.) and *Heracles* (420-419 B.C.?) seems to help in placing it in the twenties of the fifth century. The date is of interest primarily for the study of Sophocles' development and for possible relations with the work of Euripides. The play is utterly apolitical. It was, then, probably written after *Ajax* and *Antigone*, close to *Oedipus the King*, when the poet was past sixty, and with *Electra* (probably) and *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* certainly still to come.

*A Note on the Text*

For the most part I have translated the text of A. C. Pearson ("Oxford Classical Texts" [Oxford, 1923]), at a few points I have agreed with R. C. Jebb (*The Trachiniae*, Part V of *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments* [Cambridge, 1892]) as against Pearson, especially in lines 207, 328, 526, 660, 837, 905, 1084, 1186, and 1191, more rarely I have departed from the interpretation of a word or phrase preferred by Jebb in his commentary, especially in lines 35, 101, 216, 231, 250, 309, 886, and 1010. In lines 100-102 the "seanarrows" probably refer to the Bosphorus and Hellespont, the "twin continents" to Europe and Africa at the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar); this agrees with H. Lloyd-Jones, *Classical Quarterly*, XLVIII (1954), 91-92. Finally, with Wilamowitz, I add *τέλος* in line 528, and at line 857 I read Herwerden's *ἄ τ' ὀλεθρίαν* for *τότε θοάν*. I do not attempt any justification, since this is not the place and since, in any case, the choices have been much influenced by the exigencies of making a translation.

# THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

## CHARACTERS

*Deianira, Wife of Heracles*

*Nurse*

*Hyllus, Son of Heracles and Deianira*

*Chorus, Women of Trachis, Friends of Deianira*

*A Messenger*

*Lichas, Herald of Heracles*

*Captive Women of Oechalia, Including the Young Iole (all silent parts)*

*An Old Man*

*Heracles*

*Bearers and Attendants of Heracles (silent parts)*

## THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS

SCENE: *Trachis, before the house of Heracles and Deianira. Deianira and the Nurse enter from the house.*

*Deianira*

It was long ago that someone first said:  
You cannot know a man's life before the man  
has died, then only can you call it good or bad.  
But I know mine before I've come to Death's house  
and I can tell that mine is heavy and sorrowful. 5  
While I still lived in Pleuron, with Oeneus my father,  
I conceived an agonizing fear of marriage.  
No other Aetolian woman ever felt such fear,  
for my suitor was the river Achelôius,  
who used to come to ask my father for my hand, 10  
taking three forms—first, clearly a bull, and then  
a serpent with shimmering coils, then a man's body  
but a bull's face, and from his clump of beard  
whole torrents of water splashed like a fountain.  
I had to think this suitor would be my husband 15  
and in my unhappiness I constantly prayed for death  
before I should ever come to *his* marriage bed.

But, after a time, to my joy there came  
the famous Heracles, son of Alcmena and Zeus.  
In close combat with Achelôius, he won the contest 20  
and set me free. I do not speak of the manner  
of their struggles, for I do not know. Someone  
who watched the spectacle unafraid could tell.  
I sank down, overwhelmed with terror lest  
my beauty should somehow bring me pain. Zeus of the contests 25  
made the end good—if it has been good.



Chosen partner for the bed of Heracles,  
 I nurse fear after fear, always worrying  
 over him. I have a constant relay of troubles;  
 some each night dispels—each night brings others on. 30  
 We have had children now, whom he sees at times,  
 like a farmer working an outlying field,  
 who sees it only when he sows and when he reaps.  
 This has been his life, that only brings him home  
 to send him out again, to serve some man or other. 35

Now he wins through to the end of all his labors,  
 and now I find I am more than ever afraid.  
 Ever since he killed the mighty Iphitus,  
 we, his family, live here in Trachis, a stranger's guests,  
 forced to leave our home. But no one seems to know 40  
 where Heracles himself can be. I only know  
 he's gone and left with me a sharp pain for him.  
 I am almost sure that he is in some trouble.  
 It has not been a short time—first a year,  
 by now still more, and there has been no word of him. 45  
 Yes, this tablet he left behind makes me think  
 it must surely be some terrible trouble. Often  
 I pray the Gods I do not have it for my sorrow.

*Nurse*

Deianira, my mistress, many times before  
 I have watched as you wept and sobbed, bewailing 50  
 your absent Heracles, and I said nothing. But now  
 I wonder—if it is proper that the free should learn  
 from the thoughts of slaves and I give you advice—  
 how is it that your family abounds with sons, and yet  
 you send no one to inquire for your husband? 55  
 Hyllus, especially, it would be natural to send  
 if he is at all concerned for his father's safety.  
 See, here he is, running to the house,  
 so if what I have said seems of any value,  
 you can use the boy and follow my advice. 60

*(Hyllus enters from the wings.)*

*Deianira*

O my child, my son, even the low-born throw  
a lucky cast when they speak well. This woman is  
a slave, but what she says is worthy of the free.

*Hyllus*

What is it she said? Tell me, Mother, if you may.

*Deianira*

With your father abroad so long, it does not  
look well that you have made no inquiry for him. 65

*Hyllus*

But I know where he is, if I can believe what I hear.

*Deianira*

My child, have you heard in what country he stays?

*Hyllus*

All this past year, in all its length of time  
they say he was in service to a Lydian woman. 70

*Deianira*

If he could really endure that, then anything  
might be said of him.

*Hyllus*

He is free now, I hear.

*Deianira*

Then where is he now? Is he alive or dead?

*Hyllus*

They say he is in Euboea, where he campaigns against  
the city of Eurytus, unless he is still preparing. 75

*Deianira*

Did you know, my child, that it was about  
this very place he left me a true prophecy?

*Hyllus*

What prophecy, Mother? I knew nothing about this.

*Deianira*

It said that either he would come to his life's end  
or have by now, and for the rest of his time, 80  
a happy life, once he had carried out this task.  
Child, his future lies in the balance. Surely, then,  
you will go to help him, since we are only safe 83  
if he can save himself. His ruin is ours. 85

*Hyllus*

I shall go, Mother, and had I known the contents  
of this oracle before, I would have been there  
long ago. As it was, my father's usual  
good luck kept me from worrying and being too fearful.  
Now that I know of it, I shall not stop until 90  
I have learned the whole truth about his fate.

*Deianira*

Go now, my son. There is always some advantage  
in learning good news, even if one learns it late.

*(Hyllus leaves by one of the side entrances; the Chorus  
enters, speaking, by the other.)*

*Chorus*

Shimmering night as she lies despoiled brings you  
to birth at dawn, lays you to bed ablaze— 95  
O Sun, Sun! I beg you,  
tell me of Alcmena's child.  
Where, where is Heracles?  
All afire with the brilliance of lightning, tell me!  
—is he in the sea-narrows, 100  
or does he rest against the twin  
continents? Your sight is the strongest.  
With longing in her heart for him, I learn  
that Deianira, over whom men fought,  
like some unhappy bird, 105  
never lays to bed her longing,  
her eyes tearless, but  
nurses fear that well remembers her husband's

journey, worn upon her troubled  
husbandless bed, miserable, 110  
with expectation of misfortune.

As many waves under  
the untiring south wind or north  
may be seen on the wide  
ocean coming on 115  
and going by, so he, the descendant  
of Cadmus is twisted, but on life's  
next toilsome surge, as on the Cretan  
deep, he will be elevated.  
Some god always pulls him 120  
safely back from the house of Death.

*(The Chorus turns toward Deianira)*

Therefore, I reprove you,  
respectfully, but still  
dissenting. You should not let  
all expectation of good 125  
be worn away. Nothing painless  
has the all-accomplishing King  
dispensed for mortal men. But  
grief and joy come circling  
to all, like the turning paths 130  
of the Bear among the stars.

The shimmering night does not stay  
for men, nor does calamity,  
nor wealth, but swiftly they are gone,  
and to another man it comes  
to know joy and its loss. 135  
Therefore, I bid even you, O Queen, always  
hold fast to this knowledge in your expectations.  
When has Zeus been so careless of his children? 140

*(Deianira comes forward and speaks.)*

*Deianira*

You are here, I suppose, because you have heard

of my suffering. May you never learn  
 by your own suffering how my heart is torn.  
 You do not know now. So the young thing  
 grows in her own places; the heat of the sun-god 145  
 does not confound her, nor does the rain, nor any wind.  
 Pleasurably she enjoys an untroubled life  
 until the time she is no longer called a maiden  
 but woman, and takes her share of worry in the night,  
 fearful for her husband or for her children. Then, 150  
 by looking at her own experience, she comes  
 to understand the troubles with which I am weighed down.  
 Many sufferings have made me weep before.  
 But I shall tell you of one unlike all the rest.  
 When King Heracles set off from home on his 155  
 last journey, he left an old tablet in the house,  
 on which some signs had been inscribed. Never before  
 could he bring himself to speak to me of this,  
 though he went out to many contests; he used to go  
 as if for some great achievement, not to die. 160  
 This once, as though he were no longer living, he told me  
 what property from our marriage I should take and how  
 he wished the portions of ancestral land divided  
 among the children, first fixing the time at three months  
 after he had been away from here one year: 165  
 then he would either die exactly at this time,  
 or, by getting past this time limit, he would  
 in the future live a life without grief.  
 He said that this was fated by the Gods to be  
 the final limit of the labors of Heracles, 170  
 as once at Dodona he heard the ancient oak  
 declare on the lips of the twin Doves, the priestesses.  
 The period of their prediction exactly coincides  
 with the present time, when all must come true;  
 so that I leap up from pleasant sleep in fright, 175  
 my friends, terrified to think that I may have to live  
 deprived of the one man who is the finest of all.

*Chorus*

Peace—speak words of good omen. I see a man  
with laurel on his head who comes to speak to you

*(A messenger enters from the side in a great hurry,  
full of his important news.)*

*Messenger*

O Deianira, my mistress, I am the first messenger 180  
to free you from your uncertainty You should know  
that Alcmena's son lives and is victorious  
and brings from battle first-fruits for the gods of the land.

*Deianira*

What did you say, old man? What are you telling me?

*Messenger*

Soon there shall come to your halls that most enviable man, 185  
your husband, appearing in his conquering might

*Deianira*

Who told you this? Some townsman or a stranger?

*Messenger*

This is what Lichas, the herald, proclaims to many  
in the meadow where the cattle pasture. I heard him  
and rushed off, that, as the first to bring the news, I might 190  
profit from your gratitude and gain your favor.

*Deianira*

Why is he not here himself if all is well?

*Messenger*

He is not free to move as he would like, lady.  
Around him in a circle stand all the people of Malis  
and question him He is not able to take a step. 195  
Everyone is curious and wants to know all  
and will not let him go until he's heard him to  
his heart's content So though *he* does not want to, he stays  
with those who want him. You will see him soon in person.

*Deianira*

O Zeus, master of the unharvested meadow of Oeta, 200  
though it has been long, you have given us joy.

Cry out, O you women who are within the house  
and you who are without—now that the unhopèd-for sunshine  
of this news has risen high, we pluck its gladness

*Chorus*

Let there be joyous shouting for this house and jubilation 205  
around the hearth by girls whose wedding is to come; and let the  
clamor

of men among them go in chorus to honor Apollo,  
who wears the fine quiver, our defender. Together  
raise on high the paean, paean, O maidens, 210  
and shout aloud the name of his sister,  
Artemis Ortygia, deer-hunter, who holds the twin torches,  
and of the nymphs our neighbors. 215

I take it up, I shall not  
push the flute aside, you master of my heart.

See how it excites me—

Euoi!—

the ivy that lately set the bacchantes whirling in rivalry. 220

Oh, Oh, Paean! See, see, dear lady,

you are face to face with it now,

it is clear to look upon.

*(Enter Lichas, Heracles' envoy, followed by a group  
of captive women, among them Iole.)*

*Deianira*

I do see the group that comes to us, dear women. 225

The sight did not slip past my sentinel eyes.

I proclaim our welcome to the herald, here after  
a long time—if the news he brings is welcome.

*Lichas*

Our coming is good, lady, and good, too, our message,  
based on accomplished fact. When a man prospers, 230  
his profit must be to earn an excellent report.

*Deianira*

O kindest of men, tell me first what I want first  
to hear: Shall I have Heracles alive?

*Lichas*

I can tell you that I left him not only alive  
but strong and flourishing and unburdened by disease. 235

*Deianira*

Where? In a Greek or in a foreign land? Tell me.

*Lichas*

On a shore of Euboea, where he marks out altars  
and tributes of the land's harvest for Cenean Zeus.

*Deianira*

Is he fulfilling a vow or obeying an oracle?

*Lichas*

A vow he took while he tried with his spear to overthrow 240  
the country of these women whom you see before you.

*Deianira*

And by the gods, who are they, and who is their master?  
They are pitiable, if their misfortune does not deceive me.

*Lichas*

He selected them when he sacked the city of Eurytus  
as possessions for himself and a choice gift for the Gods. 245

*Deianira*

Was it against this city, then, that he was gone  
an unforeseeable time, days beyond number?

*Lichas*

No, most of this time he was kept in Lydia,  
and, as he himself declares, he was not free  
but a bought slave. (One should not hesitate, lady, 250  
to tell a tale where it is seen Zeus did the work.)  
He was sold to Omphale, the foreign queen,  
and served her a full year, as he says himself,  
and was so stung by this disgrace he had to bear  
that he set himself an oath and swore that he 255  
would live to see the author of his suffering,  
along with wife and child, all in slavery.



These were not empty words, but when he was pure again,  
 he raised an army of strangers and came against the city  
 of Eurytus, who alone of mortals was 260  
 responsible, he claimed, for what he had suffered.  
 Heracles had come to his house and to his hearth  
 as an old friend. But Eurytus thundered greatly against him  
 like the sea and spoke with great malice in his heart.  
 Let Heracles have in his hands, he said, inescapable arrows. 265  
 In the bow's test *his* sons left Heracles behind,  
 as for speech—Heracles was a free man's slave,  
 a broken thing! Then he got him drunk at the banquet  
 and threw him out of the house. It was this that galled;  
 and when one day Iphitus came to the hill of Tiryns, 270  
 searching for the tracks of horses that had strayed,  
 the moment his eyes looked one way, his mind on something else,  
 Heracles hurled him from the top of that flat bastion.  
 But the King was angry at this act of his,  
 he who is the father of all, Zeus Olympian, 275  
 and had him sold and sent out of the country and did not relent,  
 since this was the only man he had ever killed  
 by guile. If he had taken vengeance openly,  
 Zeus surely would have pardoned his rightful victory.  
 The Gods like foul play no better than do men. 280  
 They who were so arrogant with their vicious tongues,  
 they themselves all are inhabitants of Hell,  
 while their city is enslaved. The women you see  
 come to you, finding, in place of prosperity,  
 an unenviable existence. These were your husband's wishes 285  
 which he commanded and I, faithful to him, fulfil.  
 You may be sure that he himself will come as soon  
 as he has made the holy sacrifice to Zeus,  
 God of his fathers, for his conquest. Of much news  
 happily reported, this must be the sweetest to hear. 290

*Chorus*

O Queen, now your delight is clear, both for what  
 has come about already, and what you have heard promised.

*Deianira*

Yes, I should have every right to rejoice  
when I hear the news of my husband's great success.  
Surely my joy must keep pace with his good fortune 295  
Still, if one gives it much thought, one knows a feeling  
of dread for the man who prospers so, lest he fall.

For a terrible sense of pity came over me,  
my friends, when I saw these ill-fated women  
wandering homeless, fatherless, in a foreign land. 300  
Before they were, perhaps, the daughters of free men,  
but now they shall have to pass their lives as slaves

O Zeus, who turns the tide of battle, grant that I  
may never see you come like this against *my* children,  
and if you will come, at least not while I am alive 305  
This is the fear I feel when I look at them.

*(Deianira comes close to Iole.)*

O unfortunate girl, tell me who you are.  
Are you married? Are you a mother? To judge by your looks,  
you have never known treatment like this, but you  
are someone noble. Lichas, whose daughter is this girl? 310  
Who was her mother, and who was the father that begat her?  
Speak out, for on seeing her I pitied her most  
among these women, since only she knows how to feel.

*Lichas*

What do I know? Why do you question me? Perhaps  
in birth she is not among the humblest of that land. 315

*Deianira*

Not of royal birth? Had Eurytus a daughter?

*Lichas*

I do not know. I made no long interrogation.

*Deianira*

Did you not learn her name from one of her companions?

*Lichas*

No, I did not. I performed my task in silence.

*Deianira*

Then do tell us yourself, my poor child, for it  
would be a great shame not to know who *you* are. 320

*Lichas*

It will be quite unlike her manner up to now  
if she begins to speak, I can assure you, since  
she has not said a single thing, not one word yet.  
She suffers constantly the weight of her misfortune 325  
like pangs of labor, weeping and miserable, from the time  
she left her wind-blown fatherland. Truly, it is her  
bad luck that she cannot speak, but pardon her.

*Deianira*

Then let her be, and let her go into the house  
however she please. She should not have further grief 330  
on my account to add to her present unhappiness.  
What she has already is enough. Let us all  
enter the house so you may hasten wherever you wish  
to go and I may see to the preparations within.

*(Deianira turns to lead Lichas and the captive women into the  
house; the Messenger, who had stayed to one side while  
Lichas spoke with Deianira, approaches and  
detains her while the others pass indoors.)*

*Messenger*

Wait! Stay a moment here that you may learn, 335  
without these others, who they are that you lead inside,  
and, since you have heard nothing at all, you may discover  
what you must. For of all this I have knowledge.

*Deianira*

What do you want? Why have you stopped me from going in?

*Messenger*

Stay and hear me. The earlier message you had from me 340  
was no waste of time, nor, I think, will this be.

*Deianira*

Should we call the others back, or do you wish  
to speak only to me and to my friends here?

*Messenger*

To you and your friends I may speak—leave the others.

*Deianira*

They are gone now, so please give me an explanation 345

*Messenger*

Nothing that man has just been telling you was spoken  
in strict honesty. Either he is a liar now,  
or he was no honest messenger before

*Deianira*

What are you saying? Tell me clearly everything  
you know. I cannot understand what you have said 350

*Messenger*

I myself heard this man say—and many men  
were present who can bear me out—that for the sake  
of this girl Heracles destroyed Eurytus  
and his high-towered Oechalia, and, of the Gods, it was  
Love alone who bewitched him into this violence— 355  
not his laborious service in Lydia for Omphale,  
nor the fact that Iphitus was hurled to his death—  
it was Love, whom he brushes aside in this new version.  
But the truth is that when he could not persuade the father  
to give the child to him for his secret bed, 360  
he fabricated a petty complaint, an excuse  
to campaign against the girl's country, and sacked 362/364  
the city. And now, as you see, he is coming home 365  
and has sent her here, not without a reason, lady,  
and not to be a slave. You must not expect that!  
It would not be likely if he is inflamed with desire.  
So I thought it best to reveal the whole affair  
to you, my mistress, just as I happened to hear it from him, 370  
and there were many others listening to this same story  
in the public gathering of the men of Trachis who can  
refute him as well as I. If what I say is unkind,  
I am sorry, but still I have told the strict truth.

*Deianira*

Oh! Oh! What has happened to me? I have  
welcomed a secret enemy under my roof. 375  
Oh, I am miserable, miserable! How truly nameless  
is she, as the man who brought her swore to me—  
a girl so brilliant in her looks and in her birth!

*Messenger*

Yes, she had Eurytus for her father and was called 380  
Iole, but of course *he* could tell you nothing  
of her origin since he had never asked!

*Chorus*

Damn all scoundrels, but damn him most of all  
who practices a secret, degrading villainy.

*Deianira*

What shall I do? I must ask you, for the story 385  
which has now come out leaves me utterly stunned.

*Chorus*

Go and talk to Lichas. Perhaps he would speak out  
if you insisted on knowing, whether he liked it or not.

*Deianira*

I shall go Your advice is not unreasonable.

*Messenger*

Shall I wait meanwhile? What do you wish me to do? 390

*Deianira*

Stay, for I see the man has started from the house  
of his own accord, without my summoning him.

*(Lichas enters from the house.)*

*Lichas*

Lady, what should I say when I come to Heracles?  
Give me instructions, for, as you see, I am on my way.

*Deianira*

How quickly you are rushing off when you were 395  
so long in coming, before we have even talked again.

*Lichas*

If there is anything you wish to ask me, I am at your service

*Deianira*

Will I be able to trust in the truth of what you say?

*Lichas*

Yes—great Zeus be my witness!—as far as my knowledge goes.

*Deianira*

Tell me, then, who is the woman you brought with you? 400

*Lichas*

A Euboean. But I do not know her parents.

*Messenger*

You there! Look here! To whom do you think you are talking?

*Lichas*

And you—what do you mean asking such a question?

*Messenger*

You would be well advised to try to answer me.

*Lichas*

I speak to her who commands, Deianira, daughter 405  
of Oeneus and the consort of Heracles, if my eyes  
do not deceive me—it is my *mistress* that I address.

*Messenger*

There it is, the very thing I wanted to hear.

You say she is your mistress?

*Lichas*

It is the honest truth.

*Messenger*

Well, then, what do you think should be your punishment 410  
if you are discovered to have been dishonest with her?

*Lichas*

What do you mean “dishonest”? What are these tricky riddles?

*Messenger*

No riddles at all! You are the one who is being tricky.

*Lichas*

I am leaving. I have been a fool to listen so long.

*Messenger*

Not yet, not before you answer a few questions.

415

*Lichas*

Say what you want. You'll not be at a loss for words.

*Messenger*

That captive girl whom you brought to the house, you know  
whom I mean?

*Lichas*

I do, but why do you ask about her?

*Messenger*

You look at her with no sign of recognition,  
but did you not say she was Iole, the daughter of Eurytus?

420

*Lichas*

Where on earth did I say so? Who is going to come  
and testify that he was there and heard me talk?

*Messenger*

You spoke before many of the townspeople A large crowd  
in the public place of Trachis heard you say this.

*Lichas*

Oh, yes—

They may have said they heard me. But to repeat an impression  
is not the same as giving an accurate account.

425

*Messenger*

Impression, indeed! Did you not state under oath that you  
were bringing this girl as a consort for Heracles?

*Lichas*

I said that? By the Gods, explain to me,  
dear mistress—this stranger here, who on earth is he?

430

*Messenger*

A man who was there and heard you say her city was

completely crushed through desire for her; no woman  
of Lydia destroyed it, but his clear love for her.

*Lichas*

Please have this fellow leave. No sensible person,  
mistress, wastes his time exchanging words with a madman. 435

*Deianira*

By Zeus who flashes lightning over the topmost glen  
of Oeta, do not cheat me of the truth! Speak,  
and you will find that I am not a spiteful woman  
nor one who does not know how it is with man—  
we cannot always enjoy a constant happiness 440  
How foolish one would be to climb into the ring  
with Love and try to trade blows with him, like a boxer.  
For he rules even the Gods as he pleases, and  
he rules me—why not another woman like me?  
You see that I would be altogether mad 445  
to blame my husband, because he suffers from this sickness,  
or that woman. She has been guilty of nothing shameful,  
and she has done no harm to me. No, it is  
inconceivable. If you have learned to lie from him,  
then you are not learning honest lessons. If you school 450  
yourself in this fashion, you succeed only  
in seeming dishonest when you are trying to be decent.  
Tell me the whole truth. To gain the reputation  
of a liar is utter dishonor for a free man.  
You cannot think that I will not hear. There are 455  
many men to whom you have spoken, and they will tell me.

*(Deianira pauses, but Lichas remains silent)*

Are you afraid of hurting me? You are wrong.  
The only thing that could hurt would be not to know.  
Where is the danger in knowing? One man and many women—  
Heracles has had other women before. 460  
Never yet has one of them earned insults  
from me, or spiteful talk, nor will *she*, even  
if she is utterly absorbed in her passion,



for I pitied her deeply when I saw her because  
her own beauty has destroyed her life, and, against her will, 465  
this unfortunate girl has sacked and enslaved the land  
of her fathers. Now let all this flow away  
on the wind. To you I have this to say: You may  
be dishonest with others, but never lie to me.

*Chorus*

ObeY her. What she says is good. You will have 470  
no cause to complain later, and you will gain our thanks

*Lichas*

Well, dear mistress, I realize that you are not  
unreasonable. You see things as we mortals must.  
So I shall tell you the whole truth. I shall not hide it  
It is just as this man said A terrible longing 475  
ran through Heracles—and it *was* for this girl.  
Because of her, Oechalia, the land of her fathers,  
was overthrown by his spear with great destruction.  
None of this did he tell me to hide, I must say  
in fairness to him; none of this did he ever deny. 480  
I myself, O my mistress, was fearful lest I  
should cause pain in your breast by these words of mine  
It was I who erred, if you would call this error.  
But since, as it turns out, you know the whole story,  
for your own sake as much as for his, be kind 485  
to the woman and show that the words you spoke to her  
before you knew were said in all sincerity.  
Against all else he has won by sheer strength; but by  
this love for her he has been completely vanquished.

*Deianira*

Those are my feelings too, and so too shall I act. 490  
You may be sure I shall not choose to add to my  
afflictions hopeless resistance to the Gods. Now let us  
go into the house. I have messages for you  
to carry, and there are gifts to match the gifts you brought—  
these too you must take. It would not be right to leave 495  
empty-handed when you came so well provided.

*(Deianira and Lichas and perhaps the Messenger,  
who must be rewarded, enter the house.)*

*Chorus*

Strong is the victory the Cyprian Goddess always wins.  
I pass by  
the Gods; I would not tell how Zeus was tricked by her; 500  
nor Hades, who lives in the night;  
nor Poseidon, the shaker of the earth.

But for our lady's hand  
who were the two valiant contenders in courtship?  
Who were they who came out to struggle in bouts that were 505  
all blows and all dust?

One was a strong river with the looks of a high-horned  
four-footed bull,  
Achelous from Oeniadae; the other 510  
came from the Thebes of Bacchus,  
shaking his back-sprung bow, his spears and club  
—the son of Zeus. They came  
together then in the middle, desiring  
her bed. Alone, in the middle with them, their referee, 515  
Cypris, goddess of love's bed.

Then there was thudding of fists and clang of bows  
and confusion of bulls' horns;  
and there was contorted grappling, 520  
and there were deadly blows from butting heads  
and groaning on both sides.

But the tender girl with the lovely  
eyes sat far from them on a hillside,  
waiting for the one who would be her husband. 525

So the struggle raged, as I have told it;  
but the bride over whom they fought  
awaited the end pitifully.

And then she was gone from her mother,  
like a calf that is lost. 530

(*Deianira comes out from the house.*)

*Deianira*

Dear friends, while our visitor is in the house  
talking to the captured girls before he leaves,  
I have come out to you, unobserved. I want  
to tell you the work my hands have done, but also to have  
your sympathy as I cry out for all I suffer. 535

For here I have taken on a girl—no,  
I can think that no longer—a married woman, as  
a ship's master takes on cargo, goods that outrage my heart.  
So now the two of us lie under the one sheet  
waiting for his embrace. This is the gift my brave 540  
and faithful Heracles sends home to his dear wife  
to compensate for his long absence! And yet, when he  
is sick as he so often is with this same sickness,  
I am incapable of anger. But to live

in the same house with her, to share the same marriage,  
that is something else. What woman could stand that? 545

For I see her youth is coming to full bloom  
while mine is fading. The eyes of men love to pluck  
the blossoms; from the faded flowers they turn away.  
And this is why I am afraid that he may 550  
be called my husband but be the younger woman's man.

But no sensible woman, as I've said before,  
should let herself give way to rage. I shall tell you,  
dear friends, the solution I have to bring myself relief.

I have had hidden in a copper urn 555  
for many years the gift of a centaur, long ago.  
While I was still a child, I took it from the wounds  
of the hairy-chested Nessus as he was dying.

He used to ferry people, for a fee, across  
the deep flood of the Evenus, in his arms 560  
with no oars to drive him over nor ships' sails.  
I too was carried on his shoulders when my father  
sent me to follow Heracles for the first time

as his wife. When I was halfway across  
his hands touched me lustfully. I cried out and at once 565  
the son of Zeus turned around, raised his hands,  
and shot a feathered arrow through his chest; into  
his lungs it hissed. The beast spoke his last words to me  
as he died: "Daughter of old Oeneus,  
if you listen to me, you shall have great profit 570  
from my ferrying, since you are the last I have brought across.  
If you take in your hands this blood, clotted in  
my wounds, wherever it is black with the bile  
of the Hydra, the monstrous serpent of Lerna, in which  
he dipped his arrows, you will have a charm over 575  
the heart of Heracles, so he will never look  
at another woman and love her more than you."  
I have thought of this, my friends, for since his death  
I have kept it in the house, tightly closed.  
I followed all instructions he gave me while he still lived 580  
and dipped this robe in the charm. Now it is all done.

I am not a woman who tries to be—and may  
I never learn to be—bad and bold. I hate  
women who are. But if somehow by these charms,  
these spells I lay on Heracles, I can defeat 585  
the girl—well, the move is made, unless you think  
I am acting rashly. If so, I shall stop.

*Chorus*

If there is reason for confidence in these measures,  
you do not seem to us to have acted badly.

*Deianira*

I have this much confidence only: there seem to be 590  
good prospects, but I have never brought them to the test.

*Chorus*

One can only tell from action. Whatever you think,  
you have no way of judging before you try it out.

*Deianira*

Well, we shall know soon. I see the messenger  
coming out of doors, and he will be going shortly. 595  
Only be discreet. In darkness one may be  
ashamed of what one does, without the shame of disgrace

*(Lichas comes out from the house.)*

*Lichas*

What would you wish me to do? Command me, O daughter of  
Oeneus.

I have already stayed too long, and now I am late.

*Deianira*

Lichas, this is the very thing I have looked after 600  
while you were talking to the foreign women inside.  
Here is a gift made by my own hands for you  
to take to my husband—this long, fine-woven robe  
When you give it to him, you must tell him that it  
should touch the skin of no man before it touches his, 605  
nor should he let the light of the sun look upon it,  
nor any holy inclosure, nor the gleam from a hearth,  
until he himself stands, conspicuous before all,  
and shows it to the Gods on a day of bull-slaughtering.  
For this was my vow: if I should ever see or hear 610  
that he was coming safe to his home, in all piety  
I would dress him in this robe to appear before  
the Gods to make new sacrifice in new clothing  
And you shall carry a token of this vow which he  
will understand from the familiar encircled print 615  
of my seal.

Go now, and as a messenger  
be sure to keep the rule not to exceed your orders.  
In this way, with thanks both from my husband and  
from me, you will earn our double gratitude.

*Lichas*

If I, the messenger, practice this art of Hermes 620  
soundly, I shall never fail in serving you.

I shall present this chest exactly as it is,  
and in explanation I shall repeat your words.

*Deianira*

Then you should be going now You understand  
completely how everything is here in this house. 625

*Lichas*

I understand, and I shall report that all is well.

*Deianira*

And, of course, since you saw it, you know the girl's  
reception—you know I received her as a friend.

*Lichas*

Yes, I do, and I am astonished and delighted.

*Deianira*

What else is there to tell him? For I am afraid 630  
you would be talking too soon of my longing for him  
before I know if *he* feels longing for me.

*(Exit Lichas through a side entrance; Deianira enters the house.)*

*Chorus*

Safe harbors, hot-springs among  
the rocks, the high cliffs of Oeta—  
all you who live by these and by the inmost reaches 635  
of the sea in Malis,  
the coast of the Maid who shoots the golden shaft,  
and there at the Gates,  
the famous gatherings of the Greeks—

Soon again the lovely cries 640  
of the flute will rise among you;  
now it will not ring in disagreeable clamor  
but like the lyre, music  
for the gods. The son of Zeus and Alcmena  
hurries to his home 645  
bearing the prizes of all valor.

Gone from the city completely,  
we missed him, waiting a long twelve months, while he  
was on the sea, but we knew  
nothing, and his loving wife 650  
all lamentation always, sadly, most  
sadly, broke her heart.  
But now Ares, God of War,  
stung to madness, dispels her day of troubles.

Oh let him come, let him come, 655  
and his ship of many oars, let it  
not stop before he ends his journey  
at this city, leaving the island  
hearth where, they say, he makes sacrifice.  
Let him come from there 660  
all desire when the beast's  
inducements, all dipped in persuasion, have melted him.

*(Deianira comes out from the house.)*

*Deianira*

O my friends, I am afraid! Can it be  
I have gone too far in all I have just done?

*Chorus*

What is the matter, Deianira, child of Oeneus? 665

*Deianira*

I don't know. I have a foreboding that I'll be shown  
to have done great harm when I hoped to do good.

*Chorus*

Surely you do not mean your gift to Heracles?

*Deianira*

Yes, yes. Now I see that one should never  
plunge eagerly into anything obscure. 670

*Chorus*

Explain the cause of your fear, if it can be explained.

*Deianira*

Something has happened which, if I tell you, my friends,  
will seem a marvel such as you never thought to hear.  
Just now, when I anointed the robe I sent to be  
my husband's vestment, I used a tuft of fleecy white wool. 675  
This piece has disappeared, devoured by nothing in  
the house but destroyed by itself, eaten away  
and crumbled completely to dust I want to tell you this  
in detail, so you may know the whole story.

I neglected none of the instructions that beast 680  
the centaur explained to me, lying in agony  
with the sharp arrowhead in his side. I kept them  
like an inscription on bronze that cannot be washed away.  
And I only did what I was told to do—  
I must keep this drug away from fire and always 685  
deep in the house where no warm ray of light may touch it  
until I should want to apply it freshly smeared.  
And this is what I did Now, when it had to do its work,  
at home, inside the house, secretly I smeared it on  
some wool, a scrap I pulled from one of the household sheep, 690  
and then I folded my gift and put it in a chest  
before the sun could shine on it, as you saw.

But when I go in again, I see something  
unspeakable, incomprehensible to human reason  
Somehow I had happened to throw the ball of wool, 695  
which I had used to smear the robe, into the full heat  
of the sun's rays, and, as it became warm,  
it all ran together, a confused mass, and crumbled  
to bits on the ground, looking most like the dust one sees  
eaten away in the cutting of a piece of wood 700  
Like this it lies where it fell But from the earth  
on which it rests, clotted foam boils up  
like the rich liquid of the blue-green fruit  
from the vines of Dionysus, poured on the earth.



And now I do not know what to think. I see  
 myself as someone who has done a terrible thing 705  
 From what possible motive, in return for what,  
 could the dying beast have shown me kindness, when he  
 was dying because of me? No, he beguiled me,  
 only to destroy the man who shot him. But I 710  
 have come to understand now when it is too late.  
 I alone, unless my fears are fanciful,  
 I, his unhappy wife, shall destroy him.  
 I know that arrow which struck Nessus injured even  
 Chiron, who was a god, and all animals, 715  
 whatever it touches, it kills. This same poison which seeped,  
 black and bloody, from the wounds of Nessus, how can  
 it fail to kill Heracles too? At least, this is  
 my fear. And yet I have made a decision: if he goes down,  
 under the same blow I will die with him. 720  
 I could not bear to live and hear myself called evil  
 when my only wish is to be truly good.

*Chorus*

Terrible results are appalling, but one  
 should not expect the worst before anything has happened.

*Deianira*

When the plans themselves are bad, there can be 725  
 no expectations that leave any place for courage.

*Chorus*

But whenever we trip up unwillingly,  
 the anger felt is tempered, and so it should be with you.

*Deianira*

You may talk like this, since you have no share  
 in the wrong; you have no burden all your own. 730

*Chorus*

Better to be silent now—say nothing more,  
 if you do not want to tell it to your son.  
 The one who went away to search for his father is here.

(*Hyllus enters from the side*)

*Hyllus*

Mother! I wish I could have found you not as you are  
but no longer alive, or safe but someone else's  
mother, or somehow changed and with a better heart  
than now. Three ways—Oh, for any one of them!

735

*Deianira*

My son, what has happened that I should be so hateful?

*Hyllus*

What has happened? Your husband, my father—  
do you hear me?—you have killed him.

740

*Deianira*

No, no, my child! What have you blurted out?

*Hyllus*

Only what cannot fail to be. Once a thing  
is seen, who can cause it never to have been?

*Deianira*

How could you say it? Who on earth told you  
that I did this awful crime you charge me with?

745

*Hyllus*

I saw my father's heavy fall with my own eyes  
myself; I did not hear of it from anyone.

*Deianira*

Where did you come upon him? Were you at his side?

*Hyllus*

If you must hear, then I must talk and tell you all.  
When he sacked the famous city of Eurytus,  
he marched away with the trophies and the first-fruits of victory.  
On a wave-beaten shore of Euboea there is  
a point called Cenaeum, where he marked out altars  
and a whole precinct for Zeus, god of our fathers.  
There I first saw him, glad after my longing.  
He was about to make great slaughter for sacrifice

750

755

when his own herald Lichas arrived from our home,  
 bringing with him that gift of yours, the deadly robe.  
 He clothed himself in it just as you had instructed  
 and killed first his bulls, twelve perfect victims, 760  
 the pick of the booty; then he brought the number to  
 one hundred, driving a mixed herd to the altar.  
 And at first the poor wretch, his mind at ease,  
 rejoicing in his handsome dress, prayed to the Gods.  
 But as the flame from the juicy pine-wood fire 765  
 blazed high and bloody from the solemn rites,  
 the sweat broke out on his skin; the robe enfolded him  
 around his limbs, joined tightly to his sides  
 like the work of a sculptor. Spasms of pain  
 bit into his bones. Then like the vicious, murderous 770  
 viper's poison, it began to consume him.

Now he shouted for that unfortunate Lichas, who was  
 in no way guilty of your crime, demanding  
 to know the plot behind his bringing him this robe.  
 Unlucky man, he knew nothing and said it was 775  
 a gift from you alone, just as you had sent it.  
 And at that moment, as Heracles listened to his answer,  
 a piercing, tearing pain clutched at his lungs; he caught  
 Lichas by the foot where the ankle turns  
 and threw him against a wave-beaten rock that juts from the sea. 780  
 It pressed the pale brains out through his hair,  
 and, split full on, skull and blood mixed and spread.  
 All the people there cried out in horror for  
 the one man in his suffering, the other dead.  
 No one had the courage to come to Heracles. 785  
 He would be wrenched now to the ground, now in the air,  
 crying, shrieking. All around the rocks echoed,  
 the mountain headlands of Locris, the high cliffs of Euboea.  
 When he gave up at last, after throwing himself  
 miserably again and again to the earth, crying 790

« THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS »

and groaning again and again, damning the mismating  
in your wretched bed, the whole marriage that he  
had won from Oeneus, only to befoul his life,  
he raised his eyes, distorted, from the dark smoke  
that hung around him and saw me in the great crowd,  
tears pouring down my face, and, looking at me, called.

795

"My son, come to me! Do not run from me  
in my pain, even if you must die with me.  
Take me away! Above all else I ask you to put me  
in a place where no man can look at me.

800

If you have pity, at least carry me out of this land  
as soon as you can, that I may not die here."

These were his orders; we placed him in the middle of  
a boat and with difficulty landed him here,  
howling in spasms of pain. You shall be seeing him  
at once, still alive or dead only now.

805

Mother, this is what you have planned and done to my father,  
and you are caught. For this, Justice who punishes  
and the Fury will requite you. If it is right  
for a son, I curse you, and it is right, since you  
have given me the right by killing the best of all men  
on earth, such as you shall never see again.

810

*(Deianira moves away and leaves by the side.)*

*Chorus (to Deianira)*

Why do you go off in silence? Surely you see  
that by silence you join your accuser and accuse yourself?

*Hyllus*

Let her go, and I hope a fair wind blows  
to carry her far out of my sight. For why should she  
maintain the pointless dignity of the name  
of mother when she acts in no way like a mother?  
No, let her go—goodbye to her. And the delight  
she gave my father, may she find the same herself.

815

820

*(Hyllus enters the house.)*

*Chorus*

See, maidens, how, suddenly, it has closed  
 with us, the prophetic word spoken  
 with foreknowledge long ago, that said  
 when the year of the twelfth plowing came to an end,  
 then it would bring an end for the true-born son of Zeus 825  
 to his relay of toils. And now, surely,  
 at the right time, it all comes home.  
 How can he who no longer sees  
 still have, still, toilsome  
 servitude, when he is dead? 830

If there clings to him in a murderous cloud  
 the centaur's treacherous, sure trap  
 and his sides are soaked with venom  
 that Death begat and the shimmering serpent bred,  
 how shall he see another sun after today's 835  
 when the Hydra, horrible and monstrous, has  
 soaked in? From the black-maned beast's  
 treacherous words there comes to torture him  
 a murderous confusion,  
 sharp points brought to burning heat 840

She, poor woman, knew nothing of this  
 but, seeing great injury for her home  
 from a new marriage swiftly approaching,  
 applied her remedy; 845  
 but what came from another's will, a fatal meeting,  
 truly, lost, she laments,  
 truly, she weeps a pale,  
 foaming flood of tears Doom  
 as it advances makes clear before  
 it comes a great disaster from treachery. 850

A spring of tears burst open.  
 Such sickness, alas, has poured upon him, suffering  
 to pity as never yet came upon the hero

from his enemies. 855  
Woe for the dark head of the front-fighting spear  
that won in battle this  
fatal bride from steep  
Oechalia. But that silent  
handmaiden, Cyprian Aphrodite, 860  
is revealed, it is her work.

*(Wailing is heard inside the house.)*

*Chorus (the women speak separately throughout this scene)*

Can I be mistaken? Do I hear something,  
a cry of grief surging now through the house?  
What can I say? 865  
The sound is all too clear. They are shrieking for  
misfortune inside. The house suffers a new blow.

*(The Nurse comes out of the house.)*

And see  
this old woman who is coming toward us, to tell us  
something, see how sad she is and how she frowns. 870

*Nurse*

O maidens, that gift she sent to Heracles,  
truly it was the beginning of great sorrow for us.

*Chorus*

What new calamity have you to tell us, old woman?

*Nurse*

Deianira, motionless, has moved away  
to start upon the very last of all her journeys. 875

*Chorus*

No, you cannot mean she is dead?

*Nurse*

You know all

*Chorus*

Then she is dead, the poor woman?

*Nurse*

I tell you again, she is.

*Chorus*

Gone, poor thing! Can you tell us how she died?

*Nurse*

Horrible, the way it happened!

*Chorus*

Tell us, woman,

the fate she met

880

*Nurse*

She destroyed herself.

*Chorus*

Was her mind in a passion or sick?

*Nurse*

The weapon's cruel point  
killed her.

*Chorus*

How could she think of  
death on top of death  
and end her life all alone?

885

*Nurse*

The grim steel cut her.

*Chorus*

And helpless did you see her awful act?

*Nurse*

Yes, I saw it. For I was standing near her there.

*Chorus*

Oh, what was it? How? Tell us.

890

*Nurse*

She herself by herself set her hand to it.

*Chorus*

What are you saying?

*Nurse*

The clear truth.

*Chorus*

That bride, newly come,  
has borne, has borne a mighty  
Fury for this house.

895

*Nurse*

Yes, and if you had been near and had seen  
what Deianira did, still more would you pity.

*Chorus*

How could any woman bring her hands to this?

*Nurse*

Yes, it was terrible. You will learn everything  
and bear me witness When she went into the house, alone,  
and saw her son in the courtyard, arranging a cushioned bed  
to take with him as he went back to meet his father,  
she hid herself where no one might look at her and groaned,  
falling against the altars, that now they would be  
deserted; and whenever she touched some household thing  
she used to use before, the poor creature would weep.  
Here and there, from room to room, she kept turning,  
and if she saw some servant of the household who was  
dear to her, she would look at her sadly and weep,  
and she would call out loud to her fate and to  
her house that would have no children any more.

900

905

910

Then she stops all this, and suddenly I see her  
rushing into the bedchamber of Heracles,  
and secretly, from the shadows, I keep watch  
over her. I see the woman casting sheets  
and spreading them upon the bed of Heracles.  
Then, as soon as she had finished, she leapt up  
and sat there in the middle of her marriage bed,  
and, bursting into torrents of hot tears, she said:

915

"O my bed, O my bridal chamber, farewell  
now forever, for never again will you take me  
to lie as a wife between these sheets of yours."

920



She says nothing more, but with a violent sweep  
of her arm unfastens her gown where a pin  
of beaten gold lies above her breast. She had 925  
uncovered her whole side and her left arm.  
And I go running off with all the strength I have  
and tell her son what his mother is planning to do.  
But in the time I have been rushing there and back  
we see that she has cut her side to the liver 930  
and the seat of life with a double-bladed sword.  
Her son shrieked, for he realized, poor boy,  
that in his anger he had forced her to this act.  
He had just learned from people in the house that she  
had done unwittingly the will of the beast. 935

Then the miserable boy abandoned himself utterly  
to sobs and mourning for his mother; he threw himself  
upon her lips and there, pressing his side to hers,  
he lay and groaned over and over that he  
had struck her thoughtlessly with a cruel accusation, 940  
weeping because at one moment he was doubly  
orphaned for all his life, losing his father and her.

*(The Nurse throws open the doors of the house, revealing  
Hyllus and the body of Deianira,  
lying on a couch.)*

This is the way things are within. If anyone  
counts upon one day ahead or even more,  
he does not think. For there can be no tomorrow 945  
until we have safely passed the day that is with us still.

*(The Nurse enters the house.)*

*Chorus*

Which shall I lament first?  
Which is the more final disaster?  
In my distress I cannot tell.  
The one we can see in the house, 950

the other besets us in our thoughts—  
to have and to await are the same

Oh for a strong blast  
of fair wind coming to my hearth  
to carry me away from this place 955  
that I may not die of fright  
when I no more than look  
at Zeus's valiant son.  
They say he is coming to the house  
in unassuageable pain, 960  
a wonder beyond telling

*(Men enter from the side, carrying Heracles in a litter,  
accompanied by an old man; Hyllus enters from  
the house, closing the doors after him )*

Near, then, not distant  
is he for whom I cried, like the shrill  
nightingale. Here strangers are approaching. 965  
How are they carrying him? As though  
mourning for a friend,  
their steps are slow, soundless.  
Ah! He is carried without a word.  
Am I to think that he  
is dead or only asleep? 970

*Hyllus*

O my father!  
O my sorrow! What is left  
for me? How can I help?

*Old Man*

Be silent, child, do not excite  
the wild pain that makes him savage. 975  
He still lives, though fallen. You must  
bite your lips.

*Hyllus*

What? Alive?

*Old Man*

Do not wake him, held fast in sleep.  
Do not excite, do not set stirring  
that awful returning  
sickness.

980

*Hyllus*

But it drives me mad,  
so helpless under an immense weight!

*Heracles*

O Zeus,  
what land have I come to? Among what men  
do I lie worn out by these  
unceasing pains? O my agony!  
The filthy thing eats me again.

985

*Old Man*

Now do you see how much better it was  
to hide your sorrow in silence, nor shatter  
sleep from his head  
and eyes?

990

*Hyllus*

No, I cannot stand it  
when I see him in this suffering.

*Heracles*

O altar steps of Cenaeum, is this  
all the thanks you win me for all  
the sacrifice I made on you?  
O Zeus! Torture, torture is all  
you give me! I wish I had never seen you  
with these poor eyes that must face now  
this inexorable flowering of madness.  
Is there any singer of spells,  
any craftsman surgeon who can  
exorcise this curse, but Zeus?  
Even to see him would be a wonder!

995

1000

*(The bearers set the litter down.)*

Oh! Let me be Let  
me sleep in my misery, 1005  
let me sleep my last sleep.

Where are you touching me? Where are you laying me?  
You are killing me, killing me.  
You have prodded awake what slumbered.

It has caught me. Oh! It comes on again. 1010  
O most ungrateful of the Greeks, where are all you  
for whom I destroyed myself purging so many beasts  
from all the seas and woods? Now when *I* am sick,  
will no one turn the beneficial fire, the sword on me?

Oh! Why will no one 1015  
come and cut away  
my head from my abominable body.

*(The Old Man tries to restrain and support Heracles.)*

*Old Man*

Come, you are the man's son The task is more  
than my strength can manage. You must help. Your strength  
can easily do more for him than I.

*Hyllus*

I touch him, 1020  
but to make him unconscious of pain, that is beyond  
my power or any man's. Such is the will of Zeus.

*Heracles*

My son, my son! where are you? Help me, here,  
here, lift me up. Oh! Oh! My fate! 1025

It lunges, lunges again, the vile thing  
is destroying me—  
savage, unapproachable sickness. 1030

O Pallas! It is torturing me again. O my son,  
pity me who begot you, draw the sword—no one 1035

will blame you—strike me in the breast, heal the pain  
with which your godless mother has made me rage. Oh  
to see her fallen, felled by this death she deals me! 1040

Sweet Hades, kinsman, brother of Zeus, lull me to sleep,  
to sleep; with quick death end my agony

*Chorus*

My friends, I hear and shudder at the king's misfortunes—  
so great a man, hounded by such suffering. 1045

*Heracles*

Many are the toils for these hands, this back,  
that I have had, hot and painful even to tell of.  
But neither the wife of Zeus nor hateful Eurystheus  
has ever condemned me to such agony as this  
that the false-faced daughter of Oeneus has fastened 1050  
upon my shoulders, a woven, encircling net  
of the Furies, by which I am utterly destroyed.  
It clings to my sides, it has eaten away  
my inmost flesh; it lives with me and empties the channels  
of my lungs, and already it has drunk up 1055  
my fresh blood, and my whole body is  
completely killed, conquered by these unspeakable fetters.  
Neither the spear of battle, nor the army of  
the earth-born Giants, nor the violence of beasts,  
nor Greece, nor any place of barbarous tongue, not all 1060  
the lands I came to purify could ever do this.  
A woman, a female, in no way like a man,  
she alone without even a sword has brought me down.

O my son, now truly be my true-born son  
and do not pay more respect to the name of mother. 1065  
Bring her from the house with your own hands and put  
her in my hands, that woman who bore you, that I may know  
clearly whether it pains you more to see *my* body  
mutilated or *hers* when it is justly tortured.  
Come, my child, dare to do this. Pity me, 1070

for I seem pitiful to many others, crying  
and sobbing like a girl, and no one could ever say  
that he had seen this man act like that before.  
Always without a groan I followed my painful course.  
Now in my misery I am discovered a woman. 1075

Come close to me now, stand by your father and  
look well at my misfortune, see what I suffer.  
I shall take off the coverings and show you. Look,  
all of you, do you behold this poor body?  
Can you see how miserable, how pitiful I am? 1080

Oh, oh, the pain!  
That malignant tearing scorches me again,  
it shoots through my sides, it *will* have me struggle,  
it will not let me be—miserable, devouring sickness  
O King Hades, receive me! 1085  
O flash of Zeus, strike!

Drive against me, O King, hurl down the bolt  
of lightning, Father. Now it feeds on me again,  
it has sprung out, it blooms. O my hands, my hands,  
O my back, my chest, O my poor arms, see 1090  
what has become of you from what you once were.

The lion that prowled the land of Nemea, that scourge of herds-  
men,

that unapproachable, intractable creature,  
with your strength once you overpowered it,  
and the serpent of Lerna and that galloping army 1095  
of double-bodied, hostile beasts, violent, lawless,  
supremely strong, and the boar of Erymanthus,  
and under the earth the hell hound with three heads,  
irresistible monster, the awful Echidna's whelp,  
and guarding the golden apples the dragon at the end of the  
earth— 1100

and I have had my taste of ten thousand other toils,  
but these hands let no one set his trophies over me.

Now look at me, torn to shreds, my limbs unhinged,  
 a miserable ruin sacked by invisible disaster, I  
 who am called the son of the most noble mother, 1105  
 I who claim to be begotten of Zeus in the heavens  
 But I tell you this, even if I am nothing,  
 nothing that can even crawl, even so—  
 only let her come who has done this to me—  
 these hands will teach her, and she can tell the world. alive 1110  
 I punished the evil, and I punish them in death.

*Chorus*

O unhappy Greece, I can see how great  
 a mourning you shall have if you lose this man.

*Hyllus*

Father, since you let me speak to you now,  
 let me have silence while I speak, though you are sick. 1115  
 I ask only for what is right. Give me yourself  
 without this grim anger which stings you to such fury  
 Otherwise you cannot know how mistaken  
 is the pleasure your fury craves, the pain it feels.

*Heracles*

Say what you want and be done with it I am too sick— 1120  
 I can make no sense at all of your riddles.

*Hyllus*

It is about my mother that I come to speak,  
 about her present state and her unwilling error.

*Heracles*

Damn you! How dare you speak of her again, the mother  
 Who is a father's murderer—and in my hearing? 1125

*Hyllus*

Her state is such that one should not keep silent.

*Heracles*

No, no silence for the crime she has committed!

*Hyllus*

Nor for what she has done today, you will admit.

*Heracles*

Speak, but beware. Do not disgrace yourself

*Hyllus*

I shall speak She is dead She has just been killed.

1130

*Heracles*

By whom? I cannot believe it It is too bitter news

*Hyllus*

She is dead by her own hand and by no other

*Heracles*

Ah! She's dead too soon. She should have died by mine

*Hyllus*

Even your fury would turn aside if you knew all

*Heracles*

A strange beginning, but go on—what do you mean?

1135

*Hyllus*

In all that she did wrong she had intended good.

*Heracles*

Good? Does she do good when she kills your father?

*Hyllus*

It was a charm for love she wanted to put on you  
that failed—when she saw that marriage in her house

*Heracles*

Who in Trachis knows such deadly drugs as this?

1140

*Hyllus*

Nessus the centaur long ago persuaded her  
to excite your desire with this fatal charm

*Heracles*

Woe, woe is me! This is my miserable end.  
Lost! I am lost! I see the light no longer  
Ah! Now I know the doom that is upon me  
Come, my child. You no longer have a father.  
Call together all my children, your brothers,

1145



and call the unhappy Alcmena who was the bride of Zeus  
to her cost. You shall learn from me with my  
last words all the prophecies I know 1150

*Hyllus*

But your mother is not here. It happens that  
she is living now at Tiryns on the sea,  
and of your children she has taken some with her  
to care for, and others, I must tell you, are living in Thebes.  
But all of us who are here—if there is anything, 1155  
Father, we must do, we shall listen and serve you.

*Heracles*

Then hear your task. You have come to that point  
where you must show the sort of man you are that you  
are called my son Long ago my father revealed  
to me that I should die by nothing that draws breath 1160  
but by someone dead, an inhabitant of Hell.  
This was that beast, the centaur, who has in death killed me  
alive, even as it had been divinely revealed.  
Now I shall show you how more recent prophecies  
agree with this exactly and give support to the old 1165  
I went to the grove of the mountain-dwelling Selis who sleep  
upon the ground and I copied down the words  
from my father's oak that speaks with many tongues,  
which told me that, at this present, living time,  
release from all the toils imposed on me would be 1170  
complete. And I thought that then I would be happy.  
But it only meant that I would die then.  
For the dead there are no more toils. My son,  
since all this is coming true so clearly, you must  
be ready to stand by my side in the fight, and you must not 1175  
hesitate till I am forced to use sharp words.  
On your own, agree to act with me; discover  
yourself the finest rule—obedience to your father.

*Hyllus*

Father, I am alarmed to see where your words lead,  
but I shall obey you in whatever you decide.

1180

*Heracles*

You must give me your right hand first of all.

*Hyllus*

Will you tell me why you must have this strong pledge?

*Heracles*

Quickly, give me your hand. Do not disobey me.

*Hyllus*

Here, I reach my hand. I shall deny you nothing.

*Heracles*

Swear now by the head of Zeus who begot me.

1185

*Hyllus*

Swear to do what? Will you tell me that?

*Heracles*

Swear to fulfil completely the task I give to you

*Hyllus*

I do swear, and I take my oath on Zeus

*Heracles*

And pray for punishment if you break your oath.

*Hyllus*

I pray, though I shall keep my oath and not be punished.

1190

*Heracles*

You know that high crag of Zeus on Mount Oeta?

*Hyllus*

Yes. I have often stood there to sacrifice.

*Heracles*

Then you must take my body up there, with your  
own hands and with the help of any friends you wish,  
and you must fell a great forest of deep-rooted oak,  
and many trees of the lusty wild olive

1195

you must cut down as well, and put my body on them,  
and then take the flaming brand of a pine torch  
and burn. Let me have no tears, no mourning Do  
your job without lamentation, without tears, 1200  
if you are your father's son, or even below  
I shall wait for you, a crushing curse forever.

*Hyllus*

Oh! What are you saying? What have you forced me to do?

*Heracles*

What must be done. If you do not do it, then be  
another man's son—do not call yourself mine. 1205

*Hyllus*

Father, Father, how can you? You are asking me  
to be your murderer, polluted with your blood.

*Heracles*

No, I am not. I ask you to be my healer,  
the only physician who can cure my suffering.

*Hyllus*

How would I cure your body by setting it on fire? 1210

*Heracles*

If that frightens you, do the rest at least.

*Hyllus*

I shall carry you there—that I could not begrudge you.

*Heracles*

And you will complete the pyre as I told you?

*Hyllus*

So long as I do not touch it with my own hands.  
Everything else I shall do. You can be sure of me. 1215

*Heracles*

Even that much is enough. Now after your other  
great kindness, do me this one small favor.

*Hyllus*

No matter how great a favor it is, it shall be done.

*Heracles*

You know, of course, the girl who is the daughter of Eurytus?

*Hyllus*

It is Iole you mean, I suppose.

1220

*Heracles*

I see you know her. This, then, is what I tell you to do,  
my son. When I die, if you wish to be pious  
and remember the oaths you have sworn to your father,  
you must take this girl as your wife, and do not  
disobey me. No other man but you must ever  
have her who has lain with me at my side. You,  
my son, must engage yourself to her bed.  
Obey. Although you listen to me in greater matters,  
disobedience in lesser things wipes out the favor.

1225

*Hyllus*

Ah! It is wrong to argue with a sick man,  
yet how can one stand to see him with such thoughts as these?

1230

*Heracles*

You speak as if you would do none of the things I ask.

*Hyllus*

How could anyone when she alone shares  
the blame for my mother's death and your condition?  
How could anyone choose to do that, unless  
avenging fiends had made his mind sick? Better  
for me, too, to die than live with my worst enemy.

1235

*Heracles*

I see the man will not give me my due, though I  
am dying; but I tell you, if you disobey  
my commands, the curse of the Gods will be waiting for you.

1240

*Hyllus*

Oh! Soon, I can see, you will show how sick you are.

*Heracles*

You! You rouse my agony from its sleep.

*Hyllus*

So wretched, so helpless am I, no matter where I turn.

*Heracles*

Because you do not choose to listen to your father.

*Hyllus*

But shall I listen, Father, and learn impiety?

1245

*Heracles*

It is no impiety if you give my heart pleasure.

*Hyllus*

Do you command me and make it right for me to do this?

*Heracles*

I do command you, and I call the Gods to witness.

*Hyllus*

I shall do it then, and I shall not forswear  
since you have shown the Gods it is your will. No one  
could think me wrong in obeying you, Father.

1250

*Heracles*

In the end you act well. Now make your mercy  
follow swift upon your words. Put me on  
the pyre before another tearing, stinging blow  
can strike. Come, hurry. Lift me up. The true  
respite from suffering is this—my final end.

1255

*Hyllus*

Nothing can prevent its full accomplishment  
for you, since you command and compel me, Father.

*Heracles*

Come then, O my tough soul,  
before this sickness is stirred again,  
set a steel bit in my mouth,  
hold back the shriek, and make an end  
of this unwanted, welcome task.

1260

(*The bearers raise the litter and leave by the side,  
followed by Hyllus and the Chorus.*)

*Hyllus*

Raise him, my helpers. From you let me have  
much compassion now for what I do. 1265

You see how little compassion the Gods  
have shown in all that's happened; they  
who are called our fathers, who begot us,  
can look upon such suffering.

No one can foresee what is to come. 1270

What is here now is pitiful for us  
and shameful for the Gods;  
but of all men it is hardest for him  
who is the victim of this disaster.

*(Hyllus turns to the leader of the Chorus.)*

Maiden, come from the house with us. 1275

You have seen a terrible death  
and agonies, many and strange, and there is  
nothing here which is not Zeus.

*(Exeunt )*



# ELECTRA

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

*DAVID GRENE*





## INTRODUCTION TO THE *ELECTRA*

IT is often said by classical scholars that, of the three dramatic treatments of the Orestes legend which we possess in the Greek tragedies, that of Sophocles stands closest to the Homeric account. Homer introduces the story of Orestes several times in the *Odyssey* and always for its exemplary effect. The return of Orestes and the punishment of Aegisthus, and only incidentally Clytemnestra, is mentioned as a warning of what will happen to the suitors when Odysseus comes home. Homer shows no awareness of the brutality of the murder of the mother by her son or of any of the consequences, religious or sociological, which interest both Aeschylus and Euripides later. The whole is a saga of successful revenge. It is worth noticing, of course, that Homer introduces the incident as an *example* of what may happen when Odysseus comes home. He is not giving us his speculations on matricide. Still, even at that, it is perhaps curious that the revenge taken, including the killing of Clytemnestra, can be treated with such clarity of moral judgment in favor of the killers.

In outline Sophocles appears to handle the story as Homer does, as a revenge theme, with no divine or other sanctions invoked against the murderers. But it is difficult to believe that Sophocles' interpretation should be taken on so simple a level. Almost forty-five years before the Sophoclean play, Aeschylus had written the *Oresteia*, which treated the legend with exactly the questions in mind that Homer had omitted. The *Oresteia* was a great popular success. It is extremely unlikely that Sophocles later could have reverted to the older and simpler explanation of the story without submitting a new interpretation of his own. The latter is, in fact, what he did.

He certainly did write with the Homeric outline in mind. For instance, in Aeschylus the responsibility for goading Orestes to kill both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra is Apollo's, and consequently the purification, with all its attendant complications and conflict, belongs

to Apollo. Sophocles minimized Apollo's role, mentioning him only a few times in the play as the author of indefinitely favorable oracles. The question of the purification or of Orestes' madness after the killing of his mother does not arise. But Sophocles has used the very flatness of the Homeric version to emphasize the unspoken questions which are in the mind of his fifth-century audience. If this is simply a story of murder and the settlement of a family feud, including the killing of a mother by her son, we are given a special Sophoclean portrait of the figures involved—mother, daughter, son, and Aegisthus, but especially Electra, the elder daughter.

For the play is rightly called after Electra. All the other people are included, principally, so that we should know more about her when we see her dealing with them—the savage, yet frightened, mother; the cautious and rather colorless Orestes; the timid, sensible, and unattractive sister; and the vulgar and bullying Aegisthus. Everyone acts as the foil of Electra. Everyone brings out another shade in the character previously missing. Electra makes no soliloquies to reveal herself as she does in Euripides. She is herself, in relation to others. She seems hardly to exist as a person except as a combination of reactions to others' deeds and words. Her father's death, her mother's enmity, her sister's passiveness, her brother's delay, Aegisthus' tyranny—these are her life. She says again and again that they are the causes for her being what she is.

Furthermore, Sophocles shows us Electra in reaction to happenings that in fact never took place. The disguised Paedagogus gives a vivid account of a chariot race in which Orestes is killed, the whole story being false. Orestes arrives, disguised, accompanied by the urn which supposedly contains his own ashes. Both of these are remarkable incidents as we have them in the play. The chariot race which occupies nearly 200 lines, or almost one-seventh of the entire piece, is based partly on that described in the *Iliad*, Book xxiii. It may also be based partly on some famous contemporary chariot race in which the audience would be interested and of which we know nothing. But the more exciting the account, the more it engaged the audience's attention, the greater, surely, must have been the jolt when it was realized that the description corresponded to no dramatic reality.

The terrible grief felt by Electra when she saw the urn believed to contain her brother's ashes must have awakened a jarring emotion in the audience, who knew that he was not dead, and some resentment at Orestes for standing by his sister and not telling her. These things are too gross to be explained away by any contrast between the Athenian audience's expectation and those of the theater of our own time. I think we are meant to see Electra not as a real person in her own right but as a mass of responses to other persons and their deeds and words, whether true or false. It is hard to imagine her loving someone understandingly, as Tecmessa and Deianeira did. Husbandless, childless, as she describes herself, cut off from father and mother and sister, she moves in an atmosphere of hate and hysteria provoked by facts and lies indiscriminately.

If we still think that Electra is justified by Sophocles, let us notice that she directs Aegisthus' body to be thrown to the dogs. This is, as all Greek students know, an outrage on religion and human decency, as the fifth century understood it, and is described as such by Sophocles himself in the *Ajax* and the *Antigone*. It happened at times, it is true, during the Peloponnesian War, and it is always regarded as barbaric.

No, this is no justification of Electra. Sophocles is often concerned with the power of hate—in the *Ajax*, the *Trachiniae*, the *Philoctetes*, and the *Oedipus at Colonus*. The *Electra* is a play about the power of hate and misery bred in a particular personality which finally seems to lose the natural power to create. The girl cannot live spontaneously. Her life is a series of responses—of hate for ill treatment, of love and hope for the fulfilment of revenge. The events of the years gone by shape everything else, to the elimination of any sense of the immediate present, except as the continuation of the past. The *Electra* is perhaps the best-constructed and most unpleasant play that Sophocles wrote. The tightness and cogency of the plot go together with the absence of nobility and magnitude in the chief character in a way which never occurred again in the extant plays. For sheer clarity and power, its author probably never improved on it.

ELECTRA

## CHARACTERS

*Paedagogus, the Old Servant Who Looked after Orestes when a Boy*

*Orestes, Son of Agamemnon, Murdered King of Mycenae*

*Electra, Daughter of Agamemnon*

*Chorus of Women of Mycenae*

*Chrysothemis, Sister of Electra*

*Clytemnestra, Widow of Agamemnon and Wife of Aegisthus*

*Aegisthus, Usurping King of Mycenae*

## ELECTRA

SCENE: *Before the royal palace in Mycenae.*

*Paedagogus*

Son of Agamemnon, once general at Troy,  
now you are here, now you can see it all,  
all that your heart has always longed for.  
This is old Argos of your yearning, the grove  
of Inachus' gadfly-haunted daughter.  
And here, Orestes, is the Lycean market place  
of the wolf-killing God. Here on the left  
the famous temple of Hera. Where we have come now,  
believe your eyes, see golden Mycenae,  
and here the death-heavy house of the Pelopidae.

10

Once on a time, your father's murder fresh,  
I took you from this house, received you from the hand  
of your sister, whose blood and father were yours.  
I saved you then. I have raised you from that day  
to this moment of your manhood to be the avenger  
of that father done to death. Orestes, now,  
and you, Pylades, dearest friend, take counsel  
quickly on what to do. Already the sunlight,  
brightening, stirs dawning bird song into clearness,  
and the black, kindly night of stars is gone.  
Before a man leaves his house, sets foot on the path,  
let us hold our parley. We are where  
we must not shrink. It is high time for action.

20

*Orestes*

Dearest of servants:  
very plain are the signs you show of your nobility  
toward me. It is so with a horse of breeding.  
Even in old age, hard conditions  
do not break his spirit. His ears are still erect.

So it is with you. You urge me, and yourself  
follow among the first Therefore, I will make plain  
all my determinations. Give keen ear  
to what I say, and where I miss the mark  
of what I should, correct me.

30

When I came to Pytho's place of prophecy  
to learn to win revenge  
for my father's murder on those that did that murder,  
Phoebus spoke to me the words I tell you now:  
"Take not spear nor shield nor host;  
go yourself, and craft of hand  
be yours to kill, with justice but with stealth."  
Now we have heard the oracle together  
Go you into this house when occasion calls you.  
Know all that is done there, and, knowing, report  
clear news to us. You are old. It's a long time.  
They will never know you. They will not suspect you  
with your gray silver hair. Here is your story.  
You are a stranger coming from Phanoteus,  
their Phocian friend, the greatest of their allies.  
Tell them a sudden accident befell  
Orestes, and he's dead Swear it on oath.  
Say in the Pythian games he was rolled  
out of his chariot at high speed.  
That is your story now.

40

50

We shall go first to my father's grave  
and crown it, as he bade us, with libations  
and with cuttings from my thick, luxuriant hair.  
And then we shall come here again  
and in our hands a carved bronze-sided urn,  
the urn that you know I hid here in the bushes.  
By these means we shall bring the pleasant news  
with our tale of lies, that here is my body,  
quite gone to ashes, charred and burned, before them.

For why should it irk me if I die in word  
 but in deed come through alive and win my glory?  
 To my thinking, no word is base when spoken with profit  
 Before now I have seen wise men often  
 dying empty deaths as far as words reported them,  
 and then, when they have come to their homes again,  
 they have been honored more, even to the skies.  
 So in my case I venture to predict  
 that I who die according to this rumor  
 shall, like a blazing star, glare on my foes again

60

Land of my father, Gods of my country,  
 welcome me, grant me success in my coming,  
 and you, too, house of my father;  
 as your purifier I have come,  
 in justice sent by the Gods.  
 Do not send me dishonored out of this country,  
 but rich from of old time, restorer of my house.  
 This is all that I have to say Old man,  
 let it be yours to go and mind your task  
 We two must go away. It is seasonable,  
 and seasonableness is greatest master of every act.

70

*Electra (from inside the house cries out)*

Ah! Ah!

*Paedagogus*

Inside the house some one of the servants,  
 I think, is crying.

*Orestes*

Might it not be  
 unfortunate Electra? Do you want us  
 to stay here and to listen to her cries?

80

*Paedagogus*

No. Nothing must come before we try  
 to carry out what Loxias has bidden us.  
 From there we must make our beginning,



pouring the lustral offerings for your father.  
For that, I think, will bring us victory,  
and mastery in our enterprise.

(*Orestes and his friends withdraw; Electra emerges*)

*Electra*

O Holy Light  
and air, copartner with light in earth's possession,  
how many keening dirges,  
how many plangent strokes  
laid on the breast till the breast was bloody,  
have you heard from me  
when the darkling night withdrew?  
And again in the house of my misery  
my bed is witness to my all-night sorrowing  
dirges for my unhappy father.  
Him in the land of the foreigner  
no murderous god of battles entertained.  
But my mother and the man who shared her bed,  
Aegisthus, split his head with a murderous ax,  
like woodsmen with an oak tree  
For all this no pity was given him,  
by any but me, no pity for your death,  
father, so pitiful, so cruel.  
But, for my part, I  
will never cease my dirges and sorrowful laments,  
as long as I have eyes to see  
the twinkling light of the stars and this daylight.  
So long, like a nightingale, robbed of her young,  
here before the doors of what was my father's house  
I shall cry out my sorrow for all the world to hear.

90

100

House of the Death God, house of Persephone,  
Hermes of the Underworld, holy Curse,  
Furies the Dread Ones, children of the Gods,  
all ye who look upon those who die unjustly,  
all ye who look upon the theft of a wife's love,

110

come all and help take vengeance for my father,  
for my father's murder!  
And send me my brother to my aid.  
For alone to bear the burden I am no longer strong enough,  
the burden of the grief that weighs against me.

120

*Chorus*

Electra, child of the wretchedest of mothers,  
why with ceaseless lament do you waste away  
sorrowing for one long dead,  
Agamemnon, godlessly trapped  
by deceits of your treacherous mother,  
betrayed by her evil hand?  
May evil be the end  
of him that contrived the deed,  
if I may lawfully say it!

*Electra*

True-hearted girls,  
you have come to console me in my troubles.  
I know, I understand what you say,  
nothing of it escapes me.  
But, all the same, I will not  
leave my mourning for my poor father.  
You whose love responds to mine in all ways,  
suffer me my madness,  
I entreat you.

130

*Chorus*

But from the all-receptive lake  
of Death you shall not raise him,  
groan and pray as you will.  
If past the bounds of sense you dwell in grief  
that is cureless, with sorrow unending,  
you will only destroy yourself,  
in a matter where the evil knows no deliverance.  
It is only your discomfort.  
Why do you seek it?

140

*Electra*

Simple indeed is the one  
that forgets parents pitifully dead.  
Suited rather to my heart  
the bird of mourning  
that "Itys, Itys" ever does lament,  
the bird of crazy sorrow, Zeus's messenger.  
And Niobe, that suffered all, you, too,  
I count God  
who weeps perpetually  
in her rocky grave.

150

*Chorus*

Not alone to you, my child,  
this burden of grief has come.  
You exceed in your feeling far  
those of your kin and blood.  
See the life of Chrysothemis  
and Iphianassa,  
and that one whose manhood grows in secret,  
sorrowing, a prince,  
whom one day this famed land of noble Mycenae  
shall welcome back, if God will bless his coming,  
Orestes.

160

*Electra*

I have awaited him always  
sadly, unweariedly,  
till I'm past childbearing,  
till I am past marriage,  
always to my own ruin.  
Wet with tears, I endure  
an unending doom of misfortune.  
But he has forgotten  
what he has suffered, what he has known.  
What message comes from him to me  
that is not again belied?

170

Yes, he is always longing to come,  
but he does not choose to come, for all his longing.

*Chorus*

Take heart, take heart, my child  
Still great above is Zeus,  
who oversees all things in sovereign power  
Confide to him your overbitter wrath.  
Chafe not overmuch against  
the foes you hate, nor yet forget them quite,  
for Time is a kindly God.  
For neither he that lives  
by Crisa's cattle-grazing shore,  
the son of Agamemnon, will be heedless,  
nor the God that rules by Acheron's waters

180

*Electra*

But for me already the most of my life  
has gone by without hope  
And I have no strength any more  
I am one wasted in childlessness,  
with no loving husband for champion.  
Like some dishonored foreigner,  
I tenant my father's house in these ugly rags  
and stand at a scanty table.

190

*Chorus*

Pitiful was the cry at the homecoming,  
and pitiful, when on your father on his couch  
the sharp biting stroke of the brazen ax  
was driven home.  
Craft was the contriver, passion the killer,  
dreadfully begetting between them a Shape,  
dreadful, whether divine or human,  
was he that did this.

200

*Electra*

That day of all days that have ever been  
most deeply my enemy.

O night, horrible burden  
of that unspeakable banquet.  
Shameful death that my father saw  
dealt him by the hands of the two,  
hands that took my own life captive,  
betrayed, destroyed me utterly.  
For these deeds may God in his greatness,  
the Olympian one, grant punishment to match them.  
And may they have no profit of their glory  
who brought these actions to accomplishment.

210

*Chorus*

Take heed you do not speak too far.  
Do you not see from what  
acts of yours you suffer as you do?  
To destruction self-inflicted  
you fall so shamefully.  
You have won for yourself  
superfluity of misfortune,  
breeding wars in your sullen soul  
evermore. You cannot fight  
such conflicts hand to hand, with mighty princes.

220

*Electra*

Terrors compelled me,  
to terrors I was driven.  
I know it, I know my own spirit.  
With terrors around me, I will not hold back  
these mad cries of misery, so long as I live.  
For who, dear girls, who that thought right  
would believe there were suitable comforting  
words for me?  
Forbear, forbear, my comforters.  
These ills of mine shall be called cureless  
and never shall I give over my sorrow,  
and the number of my dirges none shall tell.

230

*Chorus*

But only in good will to you I speak  
like some loyal mother, entreating  
not to breed sorrow from sorrow.

*Electra*

What is the natural measure of my sorrow?  
Come, how when the dead are in question,  
can it be honorable to forget?  
In what human being is this instinctive?  
Never may I have honor of such,  
nor, if I dwell with any good thing, 240  
may I live at ease, by restraining  
the wings of shrill lament to my father's dishonor.  
For if he that is dead  
is earth and nothing,  
poorly lying,  
and they shall never in their turn  
pay death for death in justice,  
then shall all shame be dead  
and all men's piety. 250

*Chorus*

My child, it was with both our interests at heart  
I came, both yours and mine. If what I say  
is wrong, have your own way. We will obey you.

*Electra*

Women, I am ashamed if I appear  
to you too much the mourner with constant dirges.  
What I do, I must do. Pardon me. I ask you  
how else would any well-bred girl behave  
that saw her father's wrongs, as I have seen these,  
by day and night, always, on the increase  
and never a check? 260  
First there's my mother, yes, my mother, now become  
all hatred. Then in the house I live with those  
who murdered my father. I am their subject, and

whether I eat or go without depends  
on them.

What sort of days do you imagine  
I spend, watching Aegisthus sitting  
on my father's throne, watching him wear  
my father's self-same robes, watching him  
at the hearth where he killed him, pouring libations?  
Watching the ultimate act of insult,  
my father's murderer in my father's bed  
with my wretched mother—if mother I should call her,  
this woman that sleeps with him.

270

She is so daring that she paramours  
this foul, polluted creature and fears no Fury.  
No, as though laughing at what was done,  
she has found out the day on which she killed  
my father in her treachery, and on that day  
has set a dancing festival and sacrifices  
sheep, in monthly ritual, "to the Gods that saved her."  
So within that house I see, to my wretchedness,  
the accursed feast named in his honor.

280

I see it, moan, and waste away, lament—  
but only to myself. I may not even cry  
as much as my heart would have me.  
For this woman, all nobility in words,  
abuses me: "You hateful thing, God-hated,  
are you the only one whose father is dead?

Is there no one else of human kind in mourning?  
My curse upon you! May the Gods below  
grant you from your present sorrows no release!"

290

Such is the tone of her insults, unless she hears  
from someone of Orestes' coming. Then  
she grows really wild and stands beside me shrieking:  
"Are you too not responsible for this?  
Is not this your doing, you who stole  
Orestes from these hands of mine, conveying him  
away? But you may be sure you will pay for it

and pay enough " She howls so, and nearby her  
 is her distinguished bridegroom, saying the same,  
 that utter dastard, mischief complete,  
 who makes his wars with women  
 But I am waiting for Orestes' coming,  
 waiting forever for the one who will stop  
 all our wrongs. I wait and wait and die.  
 For his eternal going-to-do-something  
 destroys my hopes, possible and impossible.

300

In such a state, my friends, one cannot  
 be moderate and restrained nor pious either.  
 Evil is all around me, evil  
 is what I am compelled to practice.

*Chorus*

Tell me, as you talk like this, is Aegisthus here,  
 or is he gone from home?

310

*Electra*

Certainly, he's gone  
 Do not imagine, if he were near, that I  
 would wander outside. Now he is on his estate.

*Chorus*

If so, I can talk with you with better heart.

*Electra*

For the present, he is away. What do you want?

*Chorus*

Tell me: what of your brother? Is he really coming  
 or hesitating? That is what I want to know.

*Electra*

He says he is—but does nothing of what he says.

*Chorus*

A man often hesitates when he does a big thing.

320

*Electra*

I did not hesitate when rescuing him.



*Chorus*

Be easy.

He's a true gentleman and will help his friends.

*Electra*

I believe in him, or else had not lived so long.

*Chorus*

Say no more now. I see your sister,  
blood of your blood, of the same father and mother,  
Chrysothemis, in her hands burial offerings,  
the usual sacrifice to the Gods below.

(*Enter Chrysothemis, Electra's sister.*)

*Chrysothemis*

What have you come to say out of doors,  
sister? Will you never learn, in all this time,  
not to give way to your empty anger?  
Yet this much I know, and know my own heart, too,  
that I am sick at what I see, so that  
if I had strength, I would let them know how I feel.  
But under pain of punishment, I think,  
I must make my voyage with lowered sails,  
that I may not seem to do something and then prove  
ineffectual. But justice, justice,  
is not on my side but on yours. If I am  
to live and not as a prisoner, I must  
in all things listen to my lords.

330

340

*Electra*

It is strange indeed that you who were born  
of our father should forget him  
and heed your mother. All these warnings  
of me you have learned from her. Nothing is your own.  
Now you must make your choice, one way or the other,  
either to be a fool  
or sensible—and to forget your friends.  
Here you are saying: "If I had the strength,

I would show my hatred of them!" You who, when I  
 did everything to take vengeance for my father,  
 never did a thing to help—yes, discouraged the doer. 350  
 'Is not this cowardice on top of baseness? /  
 Tell me, or let me tell you, what benefit  
 I would achieve by giving up my mourning?  
 Do I not live? Yes, I know, badly, but  
 for me enough. And I hurt them  
 and so give honor to the dead, if there is, there  
 in that other world, anything that brings pleasure.  
 But you who hate, you tell me, hate in word only  
 but in fact live with our father's murderers.

I tell you: never, not though they brought me your gifts  
 in which you now feel pride, would I yield to them. 360  
 Have your rich table and your abundant life.  
 All the food I need is the quiet of my conscience.  
 I do not want to win your honor.  
 nor would you if you were sound of mind. Now, when you could  
 be called the daughter of the best of fathers,  
 be called your mother's. Thus to most people prove base,  
 traitor to your dead father and your friends.

*Chorus*

No anger, I entreat you. In the words of both  
 there is value for both, if you, Electra, can 370  
 follow her advice and she take yours.

*Chrysothemis*

O ladies, I am used to her and her words.  
 I never would have mentioned this, had not  
 I learned of the greatest of misfortunes coming  
 her way to put a stop to her long mourning.

*Electra*

Tell me of your terror. If you can speak to me  
 of something worse than this condition of mine,  
 I'll not refuse it still.

*Chrysothemis*

Well, I shall tell you.

From what I learned—and if you don't give over  
your present mourning—they will send you where  
never a gleam of sun shall visit you.

380

You shall live out your life in an underground cave  
and there bewail sorrows of the world outside.

With this in mind, reflect. And do not blame me  
later when you are suffering.

Now is a good time to take thought.

*Electra*

So this is what they have decided to do with me.

*Chrysothemis*

Yes, this exactly, when Aegisthus comes home.

*Electra*

As far as this goes, let him come home soon.

*Chrysothemis*

Why such a prayer for evil, my poor darling?

*Electra*

That he may come—if he will do what you say.

*Chrysothemis*

Hoping that *what* may happen you? Are you crazy?

390

*Electra*

That I may get away from you all, as far as I can.

*Chrysothemis*

Have you no care of this, your present life?

*Electra*

Mine is indeed a fine life, to be envied.

*Chrysothemis*

It might be, if you could learn common sense.

*Electra*

Do not teach me falseness to those I love.

*Chrysothemis*

That, that is not what I teach, but to yield to authority.

*Electra*

Practice your flattery. This is not my way.

*Chrysothemis*

It is a good thing, though, not to fall through stupidity.

*Electra*

I shall fall, if I must, revenging my father.

*Chrysothemis*

My father will have pardon for me, I know.

400

*Electra*

These are words that the base may praise.

*Chrysothemis*

You will not heed me then? You will not agree?

*Electra*

No, certainly.

May I not yet be so empty-witted.

*Chrysothemis*

Then I must go on the errand I was bid.

*Electra*

Where are you going? To whom  
bringing burnt offering?

*Chrysothemis*

My mother sent me with offerings for father's grave.

*Electra*

What are you saying? To her greatest enemy?

*Chrysothemis*

"Whom she has killed"—you would add.

*Electra*

Which of her friends persuaded her? Who thought of this?

*Chrysothemis*

I think it was night terrors drove her to it.

410

*Electra*

Gods of my father, now or never stand my friends!

*Chrysothemis*

Why do "night terrors" make you confident?

*Electra*

I'll tell you that when you tell me the dream.

*Chrysothemis*

I cannot tell you much, only a little.

*Electra*

Tell me it, all the same. Often this little  
has made or ruined men.

*Chrysothemis*

There is a story that she saw my father,  
the father that was yours and mine, again  
coming to life, once more to live with her.  
He took and at the hearth planted the scepter  
which once he bore and now Aegisthus bears,  
and up from out the scepter foliage sprang  
luxuriantly, and shaded all the land  
of this Mycenae. This is what I heard  
from someone present when she told the Sun  
the nature of her dreams.

420

But beyond this

I know no more, only that she sends me  
because of her fear. And, by the Gods, I pray you,  
the Gods that live in this country, listen to me  
and do not fall out of stupidity.  
For if you should reject me, she will come  
again to harry you with punishment.

430

*Electra*

My dear one, not a morsel that you hold  
allow to touch that grave, no, nothing.

It would not be God's law nor pious that you  
 should offer to my father sacrifices  
 and lustral offerings from that enemy woman.  
 Throw them to the winds! Or hide them in deep hollowed  
 earth, somewhere where no particle of them  
 may ever reach my father where he lies.

But let them be stored up for her as treasures  
 below, against the day when *she* shall die.

I tell you, if she were not the most brazen  
 of all of womankind, would she have dared  
 to pour these enemy libations  
 over the body of the man she killed?

440

Consider if you think that the dead man,  
 as he lies in his grave, will welcome kindly  
 these offerings from her by whom he was robbed  
 of life and honor? By whom, mutilated?

And for her purification she wiped  
 the blood stains on his head? Can you believe  
 that these will prove for her a quittance offering?

No, no. You let them be. You cut a lock  
 out of your own hair, from the fringe and mine,  
 mine, too, his wretched daughter's. Such a small offering,  
 yet all I have! Give it to him, this lustrous  
 lock of hair, and here, my girdle, unadorned.

450

Kneel then and pray that from that nether world  
 he may come, a friendly spirit, to our help  
 against his enemies. Pray that the boy Orestes  
 may live to fight and win against his enemies,  
 may live to set his foot upon them.

And so  
 in days to come we shall be able to dress  
 this grave with richer hands than we can now.  
 I think, oh yes, I think that it was he  
 that thought to send this evil-boding dream  
 to her.

460

Yet, sister, do yourself this service



that never, never shall we see  
such a portent draw near without hurt  
to doers and partners in crime.  
There are no prophecies for mortal men  
in dreadful dreams and soothsayings  
if this night vision come not,  
well and truly to fulfilment.

500

Horsemanship of Pelops of old,  
loaded with disaster,  
how deadly you have proved  
to this land!  
For since the day that Myrtilus  
fell asleep, sunk in the sea,  
wrecked utterly with the unhappy  
wreck of his golden carriage,  
for never a moment since  
has destruction and ruin  
ever left this house.

510

*(Queen Clytemnestra enters from the palace.)*

*Clytemnestra*

It seems you are loose again, wandering about.  
Aegisthus isn't here, who always restrains you  
from going abroad and disgracing your family.  
But now that he is away you pay no heed  
to me, although there's many a one you have told  
at length how brutally and how unjustly  
I lord it over you, insulting  
you and yours.

520

There is no insolence in myself,  
but being abused by you so constantly  
I give abuse again.

Your father, yes,  
always your father. Nothing else is your pretext—  
the death he got from me. From me. I know it,  
well. There is no denial in me. Justice,



Justice it was that took him, not I alone.

You would have served the cause of Justice if  
you had been right-minded.

For this your father whom you always mourn,  
alone of all the Greeks, had the brutality  
to sacrifice your sister to the Gods,  
although he had not toiled for her as I did,  
the mother that bore her, he the begetter only.  
Tell me, now, why he sacrificed her. Was it  
for the sake of the Greeks?

530

They had no share in my daughter to let them kill her.  
Was it for Menelaus' sake, his brother,  
that he killed my child? And shall he not then pay for it?  
Had not this Menelaus two children who  
ought to have died rather than mine? It was their parents  
for whose sake all the Greeks set sail for Troy.  
Or had the God of Death some longing to feast  
on my children rather than hers? Or had  
that accursed father lost the love of mine  
and felt it still for Menelaus' children?  
This was the act of a father thoughtless  
or with bad thoughts. That is how I see it  
even if you differ with me.

540

The dead girl,

if she could speak, would bear me out.  
I am not dismayed by all that has happened.  
If you think me wicked, keep your righteous judgment  
and blame your neighbors.

550

*Electra*

This is one time you will not be able to say  
that the abuse I receive from you was provoked  
by something painful on my side.

But if

you will allow me I will speak truthfully  
on behalf of the dead man and my dead sister.

*Clytemnestra*

Of course, I allow you. If you had always begun  
our conversations so, you would not have been  
so painful to listen to.

*Electra*

I will tell you, then.

You say you killed my father What claim more shameful  
than that, whether with justice or without it?  
But I'll maintain that it was not with justice  
you killed him, but the seduction of that bad man,  
with whom you now are living, drew you to it  
Ask Artemis the Huntress what made her hold  
the many winds in check at Aulis. Or  
I'll tell you this. *You* dare not learn from her.

560

My father, as I hear, when at his sport,  
started from his feet a horned dappled stag  
within the Goddess' sanctuary. He  
let fly and hit the deer and uttered some boast  
about his killing of it. The daughter of Leto  
was angry at this and therefore stayed the Greeks  
in order that my father, to compensate  
for the beast killed, might sacrifice his daughter.

570

Thus was her sacrifice—no other deliverance  
for the army either homeward or toward Ilium.  
He struggled and fought against it. Finally,  
constrained, he killed her—not for Menelaus.  
But if—I will plead in your own words—he had done so  
for his brother's sake, is that any reason  
why he should die at your hands? By what law?  
If this is the law you lay down for men, take heed  
you do not lay down for yourself ruin and repentance.  
If we shall kill one in another's requital,  
you would be the first to die, if you met with justice.

580

No. Think if the whole is not a mere excuse.  
Please tell me for what cause you now commit  
the ugliest of acts—in sleeping with him,  
the murderer with whom you first conspired  
to kill my father, and breed children to him, and  
your former honorable children born  
of honorable wedlock you drive out.

590

What grounds for praise shall I find in this? Will you say  
that this, too, is retribution for your daughter?  
If you say it, still your act is scandalous.  
It isn't decent to marry with your enemies  
even for a daughter's sake.

But I may not  
even rebuke you! What you always say  
is that it is my mother I am reviling.  
Mother! I do not count you mother of mine,  
but rather a mistress. My life is wretched  
because I live with multitudes of sufferings,  
inflicted by yourself and your bedfellow.  
But the other, he is away, he has escaped  
your hand, though barely. Sad Orestes now  
wears out his life in misery and exile.  
Many a time you have accused me  
of rearing him to be your murderer.  
I would have done it if I could. Know that.  
As far as that goes, you may publicly  
proclaim me what you like—traitor, reviler,  
a creature full of shamelessness.

600

If I am  
naturally skilled as such, I do no shame  
to the nature of the mother that brought me forth.

*Chorus*

I see she is angry, but whether it is in justice,  
I no longer see how I shall think of that.

610

*Clytemnestra*

What need have I of thought in her regard  
who so insults her mother, when a grown woman?  
Don't you think she will go to any lengths, so shameless  
as she is?

*Electra*

You may be sure I am ashamed,  
although you do not think it. I know why  
I act so wrongly, so unlike myself.  
The hate you feel for me and what you do  
compel me against my will to act as I do.  
For ugly deeds are taught by ugly deeds.

620

*Clytemnestra*

O vile and shameless, I and my words and deeds  
give you too much talk.

*Electra*

It is you who talk, not I. It is your deeds,  
and it is deeds invent the words.

*Clytemnestra*

Now by the Lady Artemis you shall not escape  
the results of your behavior, when Aegisthus comes.

*Electra*

You see? You let me say what I please, and then  
you are outraged. You do not know how to listen.

*Clytemnestra*

Hold your peace at least. Allow me sacrifice,  
since I have permitted you to say all you will.

630

*Electra*

I allow you, yes, I bid you, sacrifice.  
Do not blame my lips; for I will say no more.

*Clytemnestra (to the maid)*

Come, do you lift them up, the offerings

of all the fruits of earth, that to this King here  
I may offer my prayers for freedom from my fears.

(*She speaks to the image of Apollo.*)

Phoebus Protector, hear me, as I am,  
although the word I speak is muted. Not among friends  
is it spoken, nor may I unfold the whole  
to the light while this girl stands beside me,  
lest with her chattering tongue, wagging in malice,  
she sow in all the city bad reports.

640

Yet hear me as I speak. So I will put it:  
the dreams of double meaning I have seen  
within this night, for them, Lycaean King,  
grant what is good in them prosperous issue  
but what is ill, turn it again upon  
those that do us ill.

If there are some that from my present wealth  
plot to expel me with their stratagems,  
do not permit them. Let me live out my life,  
just as my life is now, to the end uninjured,  
controlling the house of Atreus and the throne,  
living with those I love as I do now,  
the good days on our side, and with such children  
as do not hate me nor cause bitter pain.

650

These are my prayers, Lycaean Apollo, hear them  
graciously. Grant to all of us what we ask.  
For all the rest, although I am silent,  
I know you are a God and know it all.  
It is natural that the children of Zeus see all.

(*Enter Paedagogus.*)

*Paedagogus*

Foreign ladies, how may I know for certain,  
is this the palace of the King Aegisthus?

660

*Chorus*

This is it, sir. Your own guess is correct.

*Paedagogus*

Would I then be right in thinking this lady  
his wife? She has indeed a royal look.

*Chorus*

Quite right. Here she is for you, herself.

*Paedagogus*

Greetings, your Majesty. I come with news,  
pleasant news for you and Aegisthus and your friends.

*Clytemnestra*

I welcome what you have said. I would like first  
to know who sent you here.

*Paedagogus*

The Phocian,  
Phanoteus, charging me with a grave business.

670

*Clytemnestra*

What is it, sir? Please tell me. I know well  
you come from a friend and will speak friendly words.

*Paedagogus*

Orestes is dead. There it is, in one short word.

*Electra*

O God, O God! This is the day I die.

*Clytemnestra*

What is this you say, sir, what? Don't listen to her.

*Paedagogus*

What I said and say now is "Orestes is dead."

*Electra*

God help me, I am dead—I cannot live now.

*Clytemnestra*

Leave her to herself. Sir, will you tell me the truth,  
in what way did he meet his death?

*Paedagogus*

This  
I was sent to tell, and I will tell you it all.

680

He went to the glorious gathering that Greece holds  
in honor of the Delphic Games, and when  
he heard the herald's shrill proclamation  
for the first contest—it was a running race—  
he entered glorious, all men's eyes upon him.  
His running was as good as his appearance.  
He won the race and came out covered with honor.  
There is much I could tell you, but I must tell it briefly.  
I do not know a man of such achievement  
or prowess. Know this one thing. In all the contests  
the marshals announced, he won the prize, was cheered,  
proclaimed the victor as "Argive by birth,  
by name Orestes, son of the general  
Agamemnon who once gathered the great Greek host."  
So much for that. But when a God sends mischief,  
not even the strong man may escape.

690

Orestes,

when, the next day, at sunset, there was a race  
for chariot teams, entered with many contestants.  
There was one Achaean, one from Sparta, two  
Libyans, masters in driving racing teams.  
Orestes was the fifth among them. He  
had as his team Thessalian mares. The sixth  
was an Aetolian with young sorrel horses.  
The seventh was a Magnesian, and the eighth  
an Aenean, by race, with a white team.  
The ninth competitor came from God-built Athens,  
and then a Boeotian, ten chariots in all.  
They stood in their allotted stations where  
the appointed judges placed them. At the signal,  
a brazen trumpet, they were off. The drivers  
cheered their horses on, their hands vibrating the reins,  
all together. All the course was filled  
with the noise of rattling chariots. Clouds of dust  
rose up. The mass of drivers, huddled together,  
did not spare the goad as each one struggled

700

710

to put the nave of his wheel or the snorting mouths  
of his horses past his rival, wheels and backs  
of the foremost drivers all beslobbered with foam, 720  
as the breath of the teams behind beat on them.

So far all chariots were uninjured. Then  
the Aenean's hard-mouthed colts got out of hand  
and bolted as they finished the sixth lap  
and turned into the seventh. There they crashed  
head on with the Barcaean. After that,  
from this one accident, team crashed team  
and upset each other. All the plain  
of Crisa was full of wrecks. But the man from Athens, 730  
a clever driver, saw what was happening, pulled  
his horses out of the way and held them in check,  
letting past the disordered mass of teams in the middle  
Orestes had been driving last and holding  
his horses back, putting his trust in the finish.

But when he saw the Athenian left alone,  
he sent a shrill cry through his good horses' ears  
and set to catch him. The two drove level,  
the poles were even. First one, now the other,  
would push his horses' heads in front. 740

Orestes always drove tight at the corners  
barely grazing the edge of the post with his wheel,  
loosing his hold of the trace horse on his right  
while he checked the near horse. In his other laps  
the poor young man and his horses had come through safe.

But this time he let go of the left rein  
as the horse was turning. Unaware, he struck the edge  
of the pillar and broke his axle in the center.

He was himself thrown from the rails of the chariot  
and tangled in the reins. As he fell, the horses  
bolted wildly to the middle of the course.

When the crowd saw him fallen from his car,  
they shuddered. "How young he was," "How gallant his deeds," 750  
and "How sadly he has ended," as they saw him



thrown earthward now, and then, tossing his legs  
to the sky—until at last the grooms  
with difficulty stopped the runaway team  
and freed him, but so covered with blood that no one  
of his friends could recognize the unhappy corpse.  
They burned him on the pyre. Then men of Phocis  
chosen for the task have brought here in a small urn  
the lamentable ashes—all that is left  
of this great frame, that he may have his grave  
here in his father's country.

760

That is my story,  
bitter as stories go, but for us who saw it,  
greatest of all ill luck these eyes beheld.

*Chorus*

Woe, woe. The ancient family  
of our lords has perished, it seems, root and branch.

*Clytemnestra*

Zeus, what shall I say? Shall I say "good luck"  
or "terrible, but for the best"? Indeed,  
my state is terrible if I must save  
my life by the misfortunes of myself.

*Paedagogus*

My lady, why does this story make you dejected?

*Clytemnestra*

Mother and child! It is a strange relation.  
A mother cannot hate the child she bore  
even when injured by it.

770

*Paedagogus*

Our coming here, it seems, then is to no purpose.

*Clytemnestra*

Not to no purpose. How can you say "no purpose"?—  
if you have come with certain proofs of death  
of one who from my soul was sprung,  
but severed himself from my breast, from my nurture, who

became an exile and a foreigner;  
 who when he quitted this land, never saw me again;  
 who charged me with his father's murder, threatened  
 terrors against me. Neither night nor day  
 could I find solace in sleep. Time, supervisor,  
 conducted me to inevitable death.

780

But now, with this one day I am freed from fear  
 of her and him. She was the greater evil;  
 she lived with me, constantly draining  
 the very blood of life—now perhaps I'll have peace  
 from her threats. The light of day will come again.

*Electra*

My God! My God! Now must I mourn indeed  
 your death, Orestes, when your mother here  
 pours insults on you, dead. Can this be right?

790

*Clytemnestra*

Not right for you. But he is right as he is.

*Electra*

Hear, Nemesis, of the man that lately died!

*Clytemnestra*

She has heard those she should and done all well.

*Electra*

Insult us now. For now the luck is yours.

*Clytemnestra*

Will you not stop this, you and Orestes both?

*Electra*

We are stopped indeed. We cannot make you stop.

*Clytemnestra (to the messenger)*

Your coming will be worth much, sir, if you  
 have stopped my daughter's never ceasing clamor.

*Paedagogus (with a feint at departure)*

Well, I will go now, if all this is settled.

*Clytemnestra*

O no! I should do wrong to myself and to  
the friend who sent you if I let you go.  
Please go inside. Leave her out here to wail  
the misfortunes of herself and those she loves.

800

*(Clytemnestra and the assumed messenger go into the house.)*

*Electra*

There's an unhappy mother for you! See  
how agonized, how bitter, were the tears,  
how terribly she sorrowed for her son  
that met the death you heard of! No, I tell you,  
she parted from us laughing. O my God!  
Orestes darling, your death is my death.  
By your passing you have torn away from my heart  
whatever solitary hope still lingered  
that you would live and come some day to avenge  
your father and my miserable self  
But now where should I turn? I am alone,  
having lost both you and my father. Back again  
to be a slave among those I hate most  
of all the world, my father's murderers!  
Is this what is right for me?

810

No, this I will not—  
live with them any more. Here, at the gate  
I will abandon myself to waste away  
this life of mine, unloved. If they're displeased,  
let someone kill me, someone that lives within.  
Death is a favor to me, life an agony.  
I have no wish for life.

820

*Chorus*

Where are Zeus's thunderbolts?  
Where is the glowing sun?  
If they see this and hide it  
and hold their peace?

*Electra (cries out)*

Oh!

*Chorus*

Why do you cry, child?

*Electra (cries again)*

Oh!

*Chorus*

Speak no great word.

830

*Electra*

You will destroy me.

*Chorus*

How?

*Electra*

If you suggest a hope  
when all is plain, when they are all gone  
to the house of Death, and when I waste  
my life away, you tread me further down.

*Chorus*

King Amphiaraus, as I know,  
was caught in woman's golden snares  
and now beneath the earth  
reigns over all the spirits there.

*Electra*

Oh! Oh!

840

*Chorus*

Alas indeed, for pitiably

*Electra*

he died.

*Chorus*

Yes.

*Electra*

I know, I know. For him in sorrow  
there came a deliverer.

None such for me. For one there was,  
but he is gone, ravished by death.

*Chorus*

Unhappy girl, unhappiness is yours!

*Electra*

I bear you witness with full knowledge.  
Knowledge too full, bred of a life,  
the crowded months surging with horrors  
many and dreadful!

850

*Chorus*

We know what you mean.

*Electra*

So do not then, I pray you,  
divert my thoughts to where . . .

*Chorus*

What do you mean?

*Electra*

. . . there is no hope, no kinsfolk,  
and none among the nobles that will help.

*Chorus*

Death is the common lot of death-born men.

860

*Electra*

Yes, but to meet it so,  
as he did, poor darling,  
tangled in the leather reins,  
among the wild competing hoofs.

*Chorus*

None can guess whence death will come.

*Electra*

True indeed. He is now a stranger  
that was hidden in earth, by no hand of mine,  
knew no grave I gave him,  
knew no keening from me.

870

(Enter Chrysothemis.)

*Chrysothemis*

My darling,  
I am so glad, I have run here in haste,  
regardless of propriety. I bring you  
happiness and a relief from all  
the troubles you have had and sorrowed for.

*Electra*

Where could you find a cure—and who are you  
to find it—for my troubles which know no cure?

*Chrysothemis*

We have Orestes here among us—that is  
my news for you—as plain as you see myself.

*Electra*

Are you mad, poor girl, or can it be you laugh  
at what are your own troubles as well as mine?

880

*Chrysothemis*

I swear by our father's hearth. It is not in mockery  
I speak. He is here in person with us.

*Electra*

Ah!

Wretched girl! Who told you this that you believed him,  
too credulous?

*Chrysothemis*

My own eyes were the evidence  
for what I saw, and no one else.

*Electra*

Poor thing!

Poor thing! What proof was there to see? What did you  
see that has set your heart incurably  
afire?

*Chrysothemis*

I pray you, hear me by the Gods,  
and having heard me, call me sane or foolish.

890

*Electra*

Tell me, then, if the story gives you pleasure.

*Chrysothemis*

Yes, I will tell you all I saw.

When I came to our father's ancient grave,  
I saw that from the very top of the mound  
newly spilled rills of milk were flowing. Round  
the coffin was a wreath of all the flowers  
that grow. I saw in wonder, looked about  
for someone who would be near me. When I saw  
that all was quiet, I approached the grave. 900  
At the top of the pyre there was a lock of hair;  
as soon as I saw that, something jumped within me  
at the familiar sight. I know I saw  
the token of my dearest, loved Orestes  
I took it in my hands, never saying a word  
for fear of saying what would be ill-omened,  
but with my joy my eyes were filled with tears.  
Both then and now I know with certainty  
this offering could come from him alone  
Whom else could this concern, save you and me?  
I did not do it, I know, and neither did you. 910  
How could you? For you cannot leave this house,  
even to pray, but they will punish you for it.  
Nor can it be our mother. She is not inclined  
to do such things, nor, doing them, to be secret.  
These offerings at the grave must be Orestes'.  
Darling, take heart. It is not always the same  
Genius that stands by the same people. Till now  
he was hateful to us. But now perhaps  
this day will seal the promise of much good.

*Electra*

Oh, how I have been pitying you for your folly!

*Chrysothemis*

What is this? Do I not say what is to your liking?

*Electra*

You do not know where you are, nor where your thoughts are.

*Chrysothemis*

Why should I not have knowledge of what I saw?

*Electra*

He is dead, my dear Your rescue at his hands  
is dead along with him. Look to him no more.

*Chrysothemis*

Alas! From whom on earth did you hear this?

*Electra*

From one that was near to him, when he was dying.

*Chrysothemis*

Where is he then? I am lost in wonderment.

*Electra*

In the house. He is our mother's welcome guest.

*Chrysothemis*

Alas again! But who then would have placed  
these many offerings on our father's tomb?

930

*Electra*

I think perhaps that someone put them there  
as a remembrance of the dead Orestes.

*Chrysothemis*

Unlucky I! I was so happy coming,  
hurrying to bring my news to you, not knowing  
what misery we were plunged in. Now when I've come,  
I find both our old sorrow and the new.

*Electra*

That is how you see it. But now listen to me,  
and you can relieve the suffering that weighs on us.

*Chrysothemis*

How can I bring the dead to life again?

940

*Electra*

This is not what I mean I am no such fool.



*Chrysothemis*

What do you bid me do, of which I am capable?

*Electra*

To have the courage to follow my counsel

*Chrysothemis*

If I can help at all, I will not refuse

*Electra*

Look: there is no success without hardship.

*Chrysothemis*

I see As far as my strength goes, I will help

*Electra*

Hear me tell you, then, the plans that I have laid.  
Friends to stand by and help us we have none—  
nowhere—you know that quite as well as I.  
Death has taken them and robbed us. We alone,  
the two of us, are left.

950

While I still heard my brother flourished,  
alive, I had my hopes he would still come,  
some day, to avenge the murder of his father  
But now that he's no more, I look to you,  
that you should not draw back from helping me,  
your true-born sister, kill our father's murderer  
that killed him with his own hand—Aegisthus.  
There is nothing I should now conceal from you.  
What are you waiting for, that you are hesitant?  
What hope do you look to, that is still standing?  
Now you must sorrow for the loss of fortune  
that was our father's. Now you must grieve  
that you have already so many years  
without a marriage and a husband Do not  
hope you will get them now. For Aegisthus  
is not such a fool to suffer to grow up  
children of you and me, clearly to harm him.  
But if you follow my plans,

960

first, you will win from that dead father, gone  
to the underworld, and from our brother with him,  
the recognition of your piety.

And, secondly, as you were born to freedom,  
so in the days to come you will be called free  
and find a marriage worthy of you; for all  
love to look to the noble.

970

Do you not see how great a reputation  
you will win yourself and me by doing this?  
For who of citizens and foreigners

that sees us will not welcome us with praise:

“These are two sisters, friends. Look on them well.

They saved their father’s house when their foes  
were riding high, stood champions against murder,  
sparing not to risk their lives upon the venture.

980

Therefore, we all should love them, all revere them,  
and all at feasts and public ceremonies  
honor these two girls for their bravery.”

This is what everyone will say of us,  
in life and death, to our undying fame.

My dear one, hear me. Take sides with your father  
and with your brother. Give me deliverance  
from what I suffer. Deliver yourself, knowing this:  
life on base terms, for the nobly born, is base.

*Chorus*

In such concerns forethought is an ally  
to the one that gives, and her that gets advice.

990

*Chrysothemis*

Ladies, before she spoke, if she had good sense,  
she would have held to prudence, as she has not.

(*To Electra.*)

To what can you look to give you confidence  
to arm yourself and call on me to help?

Can you not see? You are a woman—no man.

Your physical strength is less than is your enemies'!  
 Their Genius, day by day, grows luckier  
 while ours declines and comes to nothingness.  
 Who is there, plotting to kill such a man  
 as this Aegisthus, would come off unhurt?  
 We two are now in trouble. Look to it that  
 we do not get ourselves trouble still worse  
 if someone hears what you have said.  
 There is no gain for us, not the slightest help,  
 to win a noble reputation if  
 the way to it lies by dishonorable death.  
 For death is not the worst but when one wants  
 to die and cannot even have that death.  
 I beg of you, before you utterly  
 destroy us and exterminate our family,  
 check your temper. All that you have said to me  
 shall be, for my part, unspoken, unfulfilled  
 Be sensible, you, and, at long last, being weaker,  
 learn to give in to those that have the strength.

1000

1010

*Chorus*

Give heed to her. No greater gain for man  
 than the possession of a sensible mind!

*Electra*

You have said nothing unexpected. Well  
 I knew you would reject what I proposed.  
 The deed must then be done by my own hand  
 alone. For I will not leave it unfulfilled.

1020

*Chrysothemis*

Ah!

I would you had felt so when our father died.  
 You would have carried all before you.

*Electra*

I was the same in nature, weaker in judgment.

*Chrysothemis*

Practice to keep that judgment through your life.

*Electra*

That is advice which means you will not help me.

*Chrysothemis*

Yes—for the effort itself implies disaster.

*Electra*

I envy you your “judgment,” hate your cowardice.

*Chrysothemis*

I will be equally patient when you praise me.

*Electra*

That you will never experience from me.

*Chrysothemis*

There’s a long future to determine that.

1030

*Electra*

Begone; for there’s no help in you for me.

*Chrysothemis*

There is, but there’s no learning it in you

*Electra*

Go and tell all this story to your mother.

*Chrysothemis*

On my side there is no such hatred as that.

*Electra*

Understand, at least, how you dishonor me.

*Chrysothemis*

There is no dishonor, only forethought for you.

*Electra*

Must I then follow *your* conception of justice?

*Chrysothemis*

You will think it *ours*, when you come to your senses.

*Electra*

It is terrible to speak well and be wrong.

*Chrysothemis*

A very proper description of yourself.

1040

*Electra*

What! Do you not think that I say what I do with justice?

*Chrysothemis*

There are times when even justice brings harm with it.

*Electra*

These are laws by which I would not wish to live

*Chrysothemis*

If you made your attempt, you would find that I was right

*Electra*

Yes, I will make it. You will not frighten me

*Chrysothemis*

Are you sure now? You will not think again?

*Electra*

No enemy is worse than bad advice.

*Chrysothemis*

You cannot agree with any of what I say?

*Electra*

I have made my mind up—and not of yesterday.

*Chrysothemis*

I will go away then. You cannot bring yourself  
to find my words right, nor I your disposition.

1050

*Electra*

Go then. I will never call you back,  
not though you long for it. It would be utter  
folly to make so hopeless an attempt.

*Chrysothemis*

Well, if you think that you are right, go on  
thinking so. When you are deep in trouble, then  
you may agree with what I said

*Chorus*

We see above our heads the birds,  
true in their wisdom,

caring for the livelihood  
of those that gave them life and sustenance.  
Why do we not pay our debts so?  
By Zeus of the Lightning Bolt,  
by Themis, Dweller in Heaven,  
not long shall they go unpunished.  
O Voice that goes to the dead below,  
carry piteous accents,  
to the Atridae in the underworld,  
and tell of wrongs untouched  
by joy of the dance.

1060

Tell them that now their house is sick,  
tell them that their two children  
fight and struggle, that they cannot  
any more live in harmony together.  
Electra, betrayed, alone,  
is down in the waves of sorrow,  
constantly bewailing her father's fate,  
like the nightingale lamenting.  
She takes no thought of death;  
she is ready to leave the light  
if only she can kill  
the two Furies of her house.  
Was there ever one so noble  
born of a noble house?

1070

None of the good will choose to live  
basely, if so living  
they cloud their renown and die nameless.  
O my child, my child, even so you  
have chosen the common lot of mourning,  
have rejected dishonor,  
to win at once two reputations  
as wise and best of daughters.

1080

I pray that your life may be lifted high

1090

over your foes,  
in wealth and power as much as now  
you lie beneath their hand.  
For I have found you in distress  
but winning the highest prize  
by piety toward Zeus  
for observance of nature's greatest laws.

*Orestes (disguised as a Phocian countryman)*

I wonder, ladies, if we were directed right  
and have come to the destination that we sought?

*Chorus*

What do you seek? And what do you want here?

1100

*Orestes*

I have asked all the way here where Aegisthus lives.

*Chorus*

You have arrived and need not blame your guides

*Orestes*

Would some one of you be so kind to tell  
the household we have come, a welcome company?

*Chorus*

This lady, nearest you, will bear the message.

*Orestes*

Then, lady, will you signify within  
that certain men of Phocis seek Aegisthus.

*Electra*

O God, O God, are these the certain proofs  
you bring of rumors we had before you came?

*Orestes*

I do not know about rumor. Old Strophius sent me  
here to bring news about Orestes.

1110

*Electra*

What is it, sir? How fear steals over me!

*Orestes*

We have the small remains of him in this urn,  
this little urn you see us carrying.

*Electra*

Alas, Alas! This is it indeed, all clear.  
Here is my sorrow visible, before me.

*Orestes*

If you are one that sorrows for Orestes  
and his troubles, know this urn contains his body.

*Electra*

Sir, give it to me, by the Gods If he  
is hidden in this urn—give it into my hands,  
that I may keen and cry lament together  
for myself and all my race with these ashes here.

1120

*Orestes (speaking to his men)*

Bring it and give it to her, whoever she is  
It is not in enmity she asks for it.  
One of his friends perhaps, or of his blood.

*Electra (speaking to the urn)*

Oh, all there is for memory of my love,  
my most loved in the world, all that is left  
of live Orestes, oh, how differently  
from how I sent you forth, how differently  
from what I hoped, do I receive you home.  
Now all I hold is nothingness,  
but you were brilliant when I sent you forth.  
Would that you had left life before I sent you  
abroad to a foreign country, when I stole you  
with these two hands, saved you from being murdered.  
Then on that very day you would have died,  
have lain there and have found your share,  
your common portion, of your father's grave.  
Now far from home, an exile, on alien soil

1130



without your sister near, you died unhappily.  
 I did not, to my sorrow, wash you with  
 the hands that loved you, did not lift you up,  
 as was my right, a weight of misery,  
 to the fierce blaze of the pyre. The hands of strangers  
 gave you due rites, and so you come again,  
 a tiny weight inclosed in tiny vessel  
 Alas for all my nursing of old days,  
 so constant—all for nothing—which I gave you;  
 my joy was in the trouble of it. For never  
 were you your mother's love as much as mine.  
 None was your nurse but I within that household.  
 You called me always "sister." Now in one day  
 all that is gone—for you are dead. All, all  
 you have snatched with you in your going, like  
 a hurricane. Our father is dead and gone.  
 I am dead in you; and you are dead yourself.  
 Our enemies laugh. Frantic with joy, she grows,  
 mother, no mother, whom you promised me,  
 in secret messages so often, you  
 would come to punish. This, all this, the Genius,  
 the unlucky Genius of yourself and me,  
 has stolen away and sent you back to me,  
 instead of the form I loved, only your dust  
 and idle shade. Alas! Alas!

1140

1150

*(She takes up an attitude of formalized mourning by the urn.)*

O body pitiable! Alas!  
 O saddest journey that you went, my love,  
 and so have ended me! Alas!  
 O brother, loved one, you have ended me.  
 Therefore, receive me to your habitation,  
 nothing to nothing, that with you below  
 I may dwell from now on. When you were on earth,  
 I shared all with you equally. Now I claim  
 in death no less to share a grave with you.  
 The dead, I see, no longer suffer pain.

1160

1170

*Chorus*

Think, Electra, your father was mortal,  
and mortal was Orestes. Do not sorrow too much.  
This is a debt that all of us must pay.

*Orestes*

Ah!

What shall I say? What words can I use, perplexed?  
I am no longer master of my tongue.

*Electra*

What ails you? What is the meaning of your words?

*Orestes*

Is this the distinguished beauty, Electra?

*Electra*

Yes.

A miserable enough Electra, truly.

*Orestes*

Alas for this most lamentable event!

*Electra*

Is it for me, sir, you are sorrowing?

1180

*Orestes*

Form cruelly and godlessly abused!

*Electra*

None other than myself must be the subject  
of your ill-omened words, sir.

*Orestes*

O, alas!

For your life without husband or happiness!

*Electra*

Why do you look at me so, sir? Why lament?

*Orestes*

How little then I knew of my own sorrows!

*Electra*

In what of all that was said did you find this out?

*Orestes*

So great, so sore, I see your sufferings.

*Electra*

It's little of my suffering that you see.

*Orestes*

How can there be things worse than those I see?

*Electra*

Because I live with those that murdered him.

*Orestes*

Murderers? And whose? Where is the guilt you hint at?

*Electra*

My father's murderers. I am their slave perforce.

*Orestes*

Who is it that forces you to such subjection?

*Electra*

She is called my mother—but like a mother in nothing.

*Orestes*

How does she force you? Hardship or violence?

*Electra*

With violence and hardship and all ills.

*Orestes*

You have none to help you or to hinder her?

*Electra*

No. There was one. You have shown me his dust.

*Orestes*

Poor girl! When I look at you, how I pity you.

*Electra*

Then you are the only one that ever pitied me.

*Orestes*

Yes. I alone came here and felt your pain.

*Electra*

You haven't come as, in some way, our kinsman?

*Orestes*

I will tell—if (*pointing to the Chorus*) I may speak here among friends.

*Electra*

Yes, friends indeed. You may speak quite freely.

*Orestes*

Give up this urn then, and you shall know all.

*Electra*

Don't take it from me, stranger—by the Gods!

*Orestes*

Do what I bid you. You will not be wrong.

*Electra*

By your beard! Do not rob me of what I love most!

*Orestes*

I will not let you have it.

*Electra*

O Orestes!

Alas, if I may not even give you burial!

1210

*Orestes*

No words of ill omen! You have no right to mourn.

*Electra*

Have I no right to mourn for my dead brother?

*Orestes*

You have no right to call him by that name.

*Electra*

Am I then so dishonored in his sight?

*Orestes*

No one dishonors you. Mourning is not for you.

*Electra*

It is—if I hold Orestes' body here.

*Orestes*

No body of Orestes—except in fiction.

*Electra*

Where is the poor boy buried then?

*Orestes*

Nowhere.

There is no grave for living men.

*Electra*

How, boy,

What do you mean?

*Orestes*

Nothing that is untrue.

*Electra*

Is he alive then?

*Orestes*

Yes, if I am living.

*Electra*

And are you he?

*Orestes*

Look at this signet ring  
that was our father's, and know if I speak true.

*Electra*

O happiest light!

*Orestes*

Happiest I say, too.

*Electra*

Voice, have you come?

*Orestes*

Hear it from no other voice.

*Electra*

Do my arms hold you?

*Orestes*

Never again to part.

*Electra (to the Chorus)*

Dearest of women, fellow citizens,  
here is Orestes, that was dead in craft,  
and now by craft restored to life again.

*Chorus*

We see, my child, and at your happy fortune  
a tear of gladness trickles from our eyes.

1230

*Electra*

Child of the body that I loved the best,  
at last you have come,  
you have come, you have found, you have known those you  
yearned for.

*Orestes*

Yes, I have come.  
But bide your time in silence.

*Electra*

Why?

*Orestes*

Silence is better, that none inside may hear.

*Electra*

No, by Artemis, ever virgin.  
That I will never stoop to fear—  
the women inside there,  
always a vain burden on the earth.

1240

*Orestes*

Yes, but consider that in women too  
there lives a warlike spirit. You have proof of it.

*Electra*

Alas, indeed.  
You have awakened my sorrow no cloud can dim,  
no expiation wash away,  
no forgetfulness overcome,  
no measure can fit,  
in all its frightfulness.

*Orestes*

I know that too. But when you may speak freely,  
then is the time to remember what was done.

*Electra*

Every moment, every moment of all time  
would fit justly for my complaints.  
For hardly now are my lips free of restraint.

*Orestes*

And I agree. Therefore, hold fast your freedom.

*Electra*

By doing what?

*Orestes*

Where there is no occasion,  
do not choose to talk too much.

*Electra*

Who could find a fit bargain  
of words for that silence,  
now you have appeared?  
Past hope, past calculation,  
I see you.

1260

*Orestes*

You see me when the Gods moved me to come.

*Electra*

You tell me then of a grace surpassing  
what I knew before, if in very truth  
the Gods have given you to this house.  
This I count an action divine.

1270

*Orestes*

Indeed, I hesitate to check your joy;  
only I fear your pleasure may be too great.

*Electra*

Orestes, you have come at last,  
have made the journey worth all the world to me,

have come before me at last.  
Now that I see you  
after so much sorrow,  
do not, I beg you—

*Orestes*

What should I not do?

*Electra*

Do not deprive me  
of the joy of seeing your face.

*Orestes*

I would be angry if I saw another  
trying to take me from you.

*Electra*

You agree?

*Orestes*

Yes.

1280

*Electra*

My dear one, I have heard you speaking,  
the voice I never hoped to hear.  
Till now I have held my rage speechless;  
I did not cry out when I heard bad news.  
But now I have you. You have come,  
your darling face before me  
that even in suffering I never forgot.

*Orestes*

Spare me all superfluity of speech.  
Tell me not how my mother is villainous,  
nor how Aegisthus drains my father's wealth  
by luxury or waste. Words about this  
will shorten time and opportunity.  
But tell me what we need for the present moment,  
how openly or hidden we may make  
this coming of ours a check for mocking foes.  
Take care, you, that our mother may not discover you  
by your radiant face, when we two go inside.

1290



Groan as for my destruction, empty  
described in words. For when we have reached success,  
then you may freely show your joy, and laugh.

1300

*Electra*

Brother, your pleasure shall be mine. These joys  
I have from you. They are not mine to own.  
To grieve you, though it were ever so little,  
I would not buy a great good for myself.  
If I did so, I would not properly  
be servant to the Genius who attends us.  
You know the situation You have heard  
Aegisthus is not at home, our mother is.  
Do not be afraid that she will see my face  
radiant with smiles. Our hatred is too old.  
I am too steeped in it. And since I have seen you,  
my tears of joy will still run readily.  
How can they cease when on the selfsame day  
I have seen you dead and then again alive?  
For me your coming is a miracle,  
so that if my father should come back to life  
I would think it no wonder but believe  
I saw him. Since your coming is such for me,  
lead as you will. Had I been all alone,  
I would not have failed to win one of two things,  
a good deliverance or a good death for me.

1310

1320

*Orestes*

Hush, hush! I hear one of the people within  
coming out.

*Electra (still loudly to the servants of Orestes)*

In with you, friends and guests,  
more so, since what you are carrying in is that  
which no one will reject there—nor be glad,  
once he has got it.

*Paedagogus (coming from inside)*

Fools and madmen! No  
concern for your own lives at all! No sense

to realize that you are not merely near  
the deadliest danger, but in its very midst.  
If I had not, this while past, stood sentry here  
at the door, your plans would now be in the house  
before your bodies. I and I only  
took the precautions. Have done once and for all  
with your long speeches, your insatiate  
cries of delight! And in with you at once.  
As we are now, delay is ruinous.  
It is high time to have done with our task.

1330

*Orestes*

How shall I find everything inside?

*Paedagogus*

Well. There is no chance of your recognition.

1340

*Orestes*

You have announced my death, I understand.

*Paedagogus*

You are dead and gone—for all your being here.

*Orestes*

Were they glad of it? Or what did they say?

*Paedagogus*

I will tell you at the end. As things are now,  
all on their side is well—even what is not so.

*Electra*

Brother, who is this man? I beg you, tell me.

*Orestes*

Do you not know him?

*Electra*

I cannot even guess.

*Orestes*

Do you not know him to whose hands you gave me?

*Electra*

What, this man?

*Orestes*

By his hands and by your forethought  
I was conveyed away to Phocian country.

1350

*Electra*

Is this the man, alone among so many,  
whom I found loyal when my father was murdered?

*Orestes*

This is he. There is no need for further questions.

*Electra*

O light most loved! O only rescuer  
of Agamemnon's house, in what a shape  
you come again! Are you indeed that other  
who saved me and Orestes from many sorrows?  
O most loved hands, service of feet most kind!  
To think you have stood beside me for so long,  
I not to know you, you to give no sign!  
You killed me with your words while you had for me  
most sweet reality. Bless you, my father,  
for in you I think I see my father. Bless you!  
Within the selfsame day, of all mankind  
I have most hated and loved you most.

1360

*Paedagogus*

Enough, I think. As for the story  
of the happenings in between, there are many days  
and nights, as time comes round, to tell you all  
clearly, Electra. But as you two stand here  
I say to you: now is your chance to act.  
Clytemnestra is alone. No man is there.  
If you stop now, you will have others to fight  
more clever and more numerous than these.

1370

*Orestes*

Pylades, we have time no longer for lengthy speeches.  
We must get inside as quick as ever we can,  
only first worshiping the ancestral Gods  
whose statues stand beside the forecourt here.

(Exit Orestes.)

*Electra (praying to the statue of Apollo)*

Apollo, Lord, give gracious ear to them  
and to me, too, that often made you offerings,  
out of such store as I had, with hand enriching.  
Lycean One, Apollo, now I pray,  
adore, entreat you on my knees, with all  
the resources that I have, be kind to us,  
help us in the fulfilment of our plans  
and prove to all mankind the punishment  
the Gods exact for wickedness.

1380

*Chorus*

See how the War God approaches,  
breathing bloody vengeance, invincible.  
They have gone under the roof-tree now,  
the pursuers of villainy,  
the hounds that none may escape.  
So that the dream that hung hauntingly  
in my mind shall not lack fulfilment.  
Stealthy, stealthy, into the house,  
he goes, the champion of dead men,  
to his father's palace, rich from of old,  
with his hands on the tool of blood, new-whetted.  
Hermes, the child of Maia, conducts  
the crafty deed to its end, and delays not.

1390

*Electra*

Dear ladies, now is the moment that the men  
are finishing their work. Wait in silence.

*Chorus*

What do you mean? What are they doing?

*Electra*

She is preparing  
the urn for burial, and they stand beside her.

1400

*Chorus*

Why have you hurried out here?

*Electra*

To watch

That Aegisthus does not come on them unawares.

*Clytemnestra (cries from within the house)*

House, O house

deserted by friends, full of killers!

*Electra*

Someone cries out, inside. Do you hear?

*Chorus*

What I hear is a terror to the ear.

I shudder at it.

*Clytemnestra (cries again)*

Oh! Oh!

Aegisthus, where are you?

*Electra*

Again, that cry!

*Clytemnestra*

My son, my son,

pity your mother!

1410

*Electra*

You had none for him,

nor for his father that begot him.

*Chorus*

City,

and miserable generation, now

the day-to-day pursuing fate is dying.

*Clytemnestra*

Oh! I am struck!

*Electra*

If you have strength—again!

*Clytemnestra*

Once more! Oh!

*Electra*

Would Aegisthus were with you!

*Chorus*

The courses are being fulfilled;  
those under the earth are alive;  
men long dead draw from their killers  
blood to answer blood.

1420

And here they come. The red hand reeks  
with War God's sacrifice. I cannot blame them.

*Electra*

Orestes, how have you fared?

*Orestes*

In the house, all  
is well, if well Apollo prophesied.

*Electra*

Is the wretch dead?

*Orestes*

You need fear no more  
that your proud mother will dishonor you.

*Chorus*

Stop! I can see Aegisthus clearly  
coming this way.

*Electra*

Boys, back to the house!

1430

*Orestes*

He is in our power!

*Electra*

He walks from the suburb full of joy.

*Chorus*

Back to the vestibule, quick as you can.  
You have done one part well. Here is the other.

*Orestes*

Do not be concerned, we will do it.

*Electra*

Go

where you will, then.

*Orestes*

See, I am gone (*hiding himself*).

*Electra*

Leave what is here to me.

*Chorus*

A few words spoken softly in his ear  
would be good, that unawares  
he may rush to his fight where Justice  
will be his adversary.

1440

*Aegisthus*

Which of you knows where the Phocians are?  
I am told they are come here with news for me  
that Orestes met his end in a chariot wreck.  
You there, yes, I mean you, you—  
you have been bold enough before, and I should think  
it is you these news concern most and therefore  
you will know best to tell me.

*Electra*

I know. Of course. Were it not so, I would  
be outcast from what concerns my best beloved.

*Aegisthus*

Where are the strangers then? Tell me that.

1450

*Electra*

Inside. They have found their hostess very kind.

*Aegisthus*

And do they genuinely report his death?

*Electra*

Better than that. They have brought himself, not news.

*Aegisthus*

Can I then see the body in plain sight?

*Electra*

You can indeed. It is an ugly sight.

*Aegisthus*

What you say delights me—an unusual thing!

*Electra*

You may delight, if you can find it here.

*Aegisthus*

Silence now! (*to the servants*) I command you, open the doors  
for Mycenaeans, Argives all, to see  
that if there be a man whom empty hope  
has still puffed up, he may look on the dead  
and so accept my biting, so may shun  
a forcible encounter with myself  
and punishment to make him grow some sense.

1460

*Electra*

I have done everything on my side. At long last  
I have learned some sense, agreement with the stronger.

*Aegisthus (looking at the shrouded corpse)*

O Zeus, I see an image of what happened  
not without envy of Gods. If that is something  
I should not say, because of Nemesis,  
I take it back. Draw all the covers from  
his face that kinship at least may have due mourning.

*Orestes*

Touch it yourself. This body is not mine,  
it is only yours—to see and greet with love.

1470

*Aegisthus*

True. I accept that. Will you call out  
Clytemnestra if she is at home?

*Orestes*

She is near you.

You need not look elsewhere.



*legisthus (as the face of Clytemnestra confronts him)*

What do I see?

*Orestes*

Something you fear? Do you not know the face?

*legisthus*

Who are you that have driven us into the net  
in which this victim fell?

*Orestes*

Did you take so long  
to find that your names are all astray  
and those you call the dead are living?

*legisthus*

Ah!

I understand. And you who speak to me  
can only be Orestes.

1480

*Orestes*

Were you, so good a prophet, so long misled?

*legisthus*

This is my end then. Let me say one word.

*lectra*

Not one, not one word more,  
I beg you, brother. Do not draw out the talking.  
When men are in the middle of trouble, when one  
is on the point of death, how can time matter?  
Kill him as quickly as you can. And killing  
throw him out to find such burial as suit him  
out of our sights. This is the only thing  
that can bring me redemption from  
all my past sufferings.

1490

*restes (to Aegisthus)*

In with you, then. It is not words that now  
are the issue, but your life.

*Aegisthus*

Why to the house?

Why do you need the dark if what you do  
is fair? Why is your hand not ready to kill me?

*Orestes*

You are not to give orders. In where you killed him,  
my father, so you may die in the same place!

*Aegisthus*

Must this house, by absolute necessity,  
see the evils of the Pelopidae, now and to come?

*Orestes*

Yours it shall see, at least.  
At least yours. There I am an excellent prophet.

*Aegisthus*

Your father did not have the skill you boast of.

1500

*Orestes*

Too many words! You are slow to take your road.  
Go now.

*Aegisthus*

You lead the way.

*Orestes*

No, you go first.

*Aegisthus*

Afraid that I'll escape you?

*Orestes*

No, but you shall not  
die as you choose. I must take care that death  
is bitter for you. Justice shall be taken  
directly on all who act above the law—  
justice by killing. So we would have less villains.

*Chorus*

O race of Atreus, how many sufferings  
were yours before you came at last so hardly  
to freedom, perfected by this day's deed.

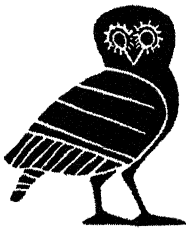
1510



# PHILOCTETES

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

*DAVID GRENE*



## INTRODUCTION TO PHILOCTETES

THE *Philoctetes* is the second-last play that Sophocles wrote. It probably came out in 409 B.C., and the last play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in 404, the year of Sophocles' death. Aristotle in the *Poetics* criticizes the *Philoctetes* for its happy ending, and many commentators since have been annoyed, or puzzled, or both by the solution of the play, which involves the God from the machine. Latterly, however, it has been more appreciated. There have been performances on the radio, and a surprising amount has been written about it, including a very interesting essay by Edmund Wilson in the *Wound and the Bow*. It is perhaps the most modern in feeling of all Sophocles' tragedies, and Sophocles is the most modern, the nearest to us, of the three Greek tragedians.

We may see the play simply as a duel between Philoctetes and Odysseus, with Neoptolemus as a pawn in the contest. But this play has a theme and a pattern which become deeper and more complicated, if we realize that in many of its aspects the story is the same as that of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Each play, seen in the light of the other, makes more comprehensible Sophocles' tragic vision. Out of what personal suffering or vicarious experience he wrote this story twice in his last years, we shall never know. It is not only a preoccupation with the end of his life. With certain important differences the *Ajax*, written more than thirty years earlier than the *Philoctetes*, shows him thinking in the same way. Of course, each of these plays is individual in tone and character. What I mean is that, in both, the story is of a man offensive to his own society and banished by it, who, at last, must be reinstated and who becomes again miraculously potent, both alive and dead. And this story is the same in both plays in all its significant aspects.

Philoctetes is afflicted by some divine power without having committed a crime or being guilty of anything which the words "conscious guilt" mean, either to the fifth-century Greek or to ourselves.

He had unconsciously stumbled into a precinct or shrine of a God. Such shrines must not be thought of in the light of the Christian associations with the word. This was probably an unmarked and unfenced place, similar to the grove of the Eumenides in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. A snake—very often in Greece a symbol of a God's power—bit him in the foot and left him crippled. It is worth noting that Philoctetes' offense against the Gods is left at this. We are not allowed by the dramatist to speculate on any symbolic significance of his act of guilt or to construe it in any way as peculiar to Philoctetes. It is, in fact, an accident. He thus becomes burdened with the mark of God's resentment without any explanation for it humanly cogent either for himself or for others. The smell of his wound and his cries of agony render him so offensive to his comrades that he is marooned on a desert island for ten years, at the end of which time the Gods intervene to rescue him as mysteriously as they had injured him at the first. A glance at the *Oedipus* figure later and that of the *Ajax* in the earlier play shows a similar emphasis on the hero's innocence. It is true that *Ajax* is driven mad in the commission of an attempted murder against his generals, but Sophocles never tries to emphasize the matter of the murder afterward; it is only the performance of his act of frustration and misery by *Ajax* that we are likely to concern ourselves with.

Philoctetes is now an outcast from human sympathy but also the future conqueror of Troy. In both destruction and triumph, his lot does not make sense for ordinary men. This troubles them very little. They discarded him out of disgust at his affliction, when it looked as though God's hatred of him made that a safe course as well as a convenient one for themselves. Now that, with similar incomprehensibility, the divine purpose insists on the value of his bow and himself for the capture of Troy, they are prepared to restore him again to their society, particularly as the God has also arranged for his healing. In the *Philoctetes* Sophocles expresses what it feels like to be a man so isolated, so impersonally, so instrumentally used by his fellows.

The moment chosen is when the restoration to potency is near. Characteristically, *Odysseus*, who had marooned him originally and had taken advantage of Philoctetes when off his guard, plans to re-

capture him by similar strategic means. Neither time is he concerned to establish any human contact with the strange magical monster, so tormented and so honored by the non-human forces of the world. In this, Odysseus is blood-brother of Creon, who, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, plays a similar role with the terrifying old beggar, Oedipus. In neither play does this cynical inhumanity have success. But neither are Philoctetes' brooding hatred and resentment allowed to have their way entirely. Here is where the role of Neoptolemus is important.

By trying to obey Odysseus, this boy comes to realize what cruelty is being inflicted on Philoctetes. So he undoes his offense and gives back the bow. However, when the deception is over and when the opportunity of healing and renown are offered Philoctetes again, by Neoptolemus this time, and as equal to equal, Philoctetes still refuses. The issue is clearly joined. Philoctetes' final refusal is the refusal of a man so wounded as to be unwilling to resume normal life itself because, with that life, will come new and unpredictable suffering. Better the old known pain, with the old known remedies, than the new hurt as unforeseeable as the future itself:

It is not the sting of wrongs past,  
but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

This is all understandable, and, more than understandable, it claims our sympathy. But it is also irreconcilable with the vital principle which in anyone's life involves change and risk. It is easy for young Neoptolemus to face the future confidently. He has not yet been hurt enough to know what it feels like. Philoctetes' refusal is a great tragic human truth.

So Heracles is invoked not as an ordinary God from the machine but as the influence of a hero and old comrade, similarly injured, similarly restored, whose example must force Philoctetes to a step which will bring him healing and renown—but also more suffering. It is not that, as Aeschylus says, "out of suffering comes learning," but that only at the cost of suffering does life itself exist. As Philoctetes' final refusal is the mark of the play's truth to humanity, so is his final acquiescence in Heracles' order the mark of a truth to a univer-

sal principle, more imperative than humanity. But it is not the Philoctetes of the island, whom we have come to know so well, who goes to Troy with Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The significant part of that Philoctetes died, persisting to the end not to surrender his resentment and to risk new wrongs. This tragedy ends with his renewed refusal of Neoptolemus. What follows is what might well happen in the world as in the theater—the surrender of the individual life to the universal demands of life itself. As Hamlet must die and Fortinbras succeed, the new Philoctetes succeeds the old; but with the other Philoctetes of the island are buried all the years of wrong and of suffering and also the meaning that they had rendered to his agony.



## CHARACTERS

*Odysseus*

*Chorus of Sailors under the Command of Neoptolemus*

*The Spy Disguised as a Trader*

*Neoptolemus, Prince of Scyros and Son of Achilles*

*Philoctetes*

*Heracles*

## PHILOCTETES

SCENE: *A lonely spot on the island of Lemnos. Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus.*

*Odysseus*

This is it; this Lemnos and its beach  
down to the sea that quite surrounds it; desolate,  
no one sets foot on it; there are no houses.  
This is where I marooned him long ago,  
the son of Poias, the Melian, his foot  
diseased and eaten away with running ulcers.

Son of our greatest hero,  
son of Achilles, Neoptolemus,  
I tell you I had orders for what I did:  
my masters, the princes, bade me do it.

We had no peace with him. at the holy festivals,  
we dared not touch the wine and meat; he screamed  
and groaned so, and those terrible cries of his  
brought ill luck on our celebrations; all  
the camp was haunted by him.

10

Now is no time to talk to you of this,  
now is no time for long speeches.  
I am afraid that he may hear of my coming  
and ruin all my plans to take him.

It is you who must help me with the rest. Look about  
and see where there might be a cave with two mouths.  
There are two niches to rest in, one in the sun  
when it is cold, the other a tunneled passage  
through which the breezes blow in summertime.

A man can sleep there and be cool To the left,  
a little, you may see a spring to drink at—  
if it is still unchoked—go this way quietly,  
see if he's there or somewhere else and signal.  
Then I can tell you the rest Listen.  
I shall tell you We will both do this thing.

20

*Neoptolemus*

What you speak of is near at hand, Odysseus.  
I think I see such a cave.

*Odysseus*

Above or below? I cannot see it myself.

*Neoptolemus*

Above here, and no trace of a footpath.

*Odysseus*

See if he is housed within, asleep.

30

*Neoptolemus*

I see an empty hut, with no one there

*Odysseus*

And nothing to keep house with?

*Neoptolemus*

A pallet bed, stuffed with leaves, to sleep on, for someone.

*Odysseus*

And nothing else? Nothing inside the house?

*Neoptolemus*

A cup, made of a single block, a poor  
workman's contrivance. And some kindling, too.

*Odysseus*

It is his treasure house that you describe.

*Neoptolemus*

And look, some rags are drying in the sun  
full of the oozing matter from a sore.

*Odysseus*

Yes, certainly he lives here, even now  
is somewhere not far off. He cannot go far,  
sick as he is, lame cripple for so long.  
It's likely he has gone to search for food  
or somewhere that he knows there is a herb  
to ease his pain. Send your man here to watch,  
that he may not come upon me without warning.  
For he would rather take me than all the Greeks.

40

*Neoptolemus*

Very well, then, the path will be watched.  
Go on with your story, tell me what you want.

*Odysseus*

Son of Achilles,  
our coming here has a purpose; to it be loyal  
with more than with your body. If you should hear  
some strange new thing, unlike what you have heard  
before, still serve us, it was to serve you came here.

50

*Neoptolemus*

What would you have me do?

*Odysseus*

Ensnare

the soul of Philoctetes with your words.  
When he asks who you are and whence you came,  
say you are Achilles' son; you need not lie.  
Say you are sailing home, leaving the Greeks  
and all their fleet, in bitter hatred. Say  
that they had prayed you, urged you from your home,  
and swore that only with your help  
could Troy be taken. Yet when you came and asked,  
as by your right, to have your father's arms,  
Achilles' arms, they did not think you worthy  
but gave them to Odysseus. Say what you will  
against me; do not spare me anything.

60

Nothing of this will hurt me; if you will not  
do this, you will bring sorrow on all the Greeks.  
If this man's bow shall not be taken by us,  
you cannot sack the town of Troy.

Perhaps you wonder why you can safely meet him, 70  
why he would trust you and not me. Let me explain  
You have come here unforced, unpledged by oaths,  
made no part of our earlier expedition  
The opposite is true in my own case;  
at no point can I deny his charge  
If, when he sees me, Philoctetes  
still has his bow, there is an end of me,  
and you too, for my company would damn you.  
For this you must sharpen your wits, to become a thief  
of the arms no man has conquered.

I know, young man, it is not your natural bent  
to say such things nor to contrive such mischief. 80  
But the prize of victory is pleasant to win.  
Bear up: another time we shall prove honest.  
For one brief shameless portion of a day  
give me yourself, and then for all the rest  
you may be called most scrupulous of men

*Neoptolemus*

Son of Laertes, what I dislike to hear  
I hate to put in execution.  
I have a natural antipathy  
to get my ends by tricks and stratagems  
So, too, they say, my father was. Philoctetes  
I will gladly fight and capture, bring him with us, 90  
but not by treachery. Surely a one-legged man  
cannot prevail against so many of us!  
I recognize that I was sent with you  
to follow your instructions. I am loath  
to have you call me traitor. Still, my lord,

I would prefer even to fail with honor  
than win by cheating.

*Odysseus*

You are a good man's son.  
I was young, too, once, and then I had a tongue  
very inactive and a doing hand.  
Now as I go forth to the test, I see  
that everywhere among the race of men  
it is the tongue that wins and not the deed.

*Neoptolemus*

What do you bid me do, but to tell lies?

100

*Odysseus*

By craft I bid you take him, Philoctetes.

*Neoptolemus*

And why by craft rather than by persuasion?

*Odysseus*

He will not be persuaded; force will fail.

*Neoptolemus*

Has he such strength to give him confidence?

*Odysseus*

The arrows none may avoid, that carry death.

*Neoptolemus*

Then even to encounter him is not safe?

*Odysseus*

Not if you do not take him by craft, as I told you.

*Neoptolemus*

Do you not find it vile yourself, this lying?

*Odysseus*

Not if the lying brings our rescue with it.

*Neoptolemus*

How can a man not blush to say such things?

110

*Odysseus*

When one does something for gain, one need not blush

*Neoptolemus*

What gain for me that he should come to Troy?

*Odysseus*

His weapons alone are destined to take Troy.

*Neoptolemus*

Then I shall not be, as was said, its conqueror?

*Odysseus*

Not you apart from them nor they from you.

*Neoptolemus*

They must be my quarry then, if this is so.

*Odysseus*

You will win a double prize if you do this.

*Neoptolemus*

What? If I know, I will do what you say.

*Odysseus*

You shall be called a wise man and a good.

*Neoptolemus*

Well, then I will do it, casting aside all shame.

120

*Odysseus*

You clearly recollect all I have told you?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, now that I have understood it.

*Odysseus*

Stay

and wait his coming here; I will go

that he may not spy my presence.

I will take with me to the ship this guard.

If you are too slow, I will send him back again,

disguise him as a sailor; Philoctetes

will never know him.

Whatever clever story he give you, then

130

fall in with it and use it as you need.  
 Now I will go to the ship and leave you in charge.  
 May Hermes, God of Craft, the Guide, for us  
 be guide indeed, and Victory and Athene,  
 the City Goddess, who preserves me ever

(*Exit Odysseus*)

*Chorus*

Sir, we are strangers, and this land is strange;  
 what shall we say and what conceal from this suspicious man?  
 Tell us  
 For cunning that passes another's cunning  
 and a pre-eminent judgment lie with the prince,  
 in whose sovereign keeping is Zeus's holy scepter.  
 To you, young lord, all this has come,  
 all the power of your forefathers. Tell us now  
 what we must do to serve you

140

*Neoptolemus*

Now—if you wish to see where he sleeps  
 on his crag at the edge—look, be not afraid.  
 But when the terrible wanderer returns,  
 be gone from the hut, but come to my beckoning.  
 Take your cues from me. Help when you can.

*Chorus*

Sir, this we have always done,  
 have kept a watchful eye over your safety.  
 But now  
 tell us what places he inhabits  
 and where he rests. It would not be amiss  
 for us to know this,  
 lest he attack us unawares.  
 Where does he live? Where does he rest?  
 What footpath does he follow? Is he in the house or not?

150

*Neoptolemus*

This, that you see, is his two-fronted house,  
 and he sleeps inside on the rock.

160



*Chorus*

Where is he gone, unhappy creature?

*Neoptolemus*

I am sure  
he has gone to find food somewhere near here;  
stumbling, lame, dragging along the path,  
he is trying to shoot birds to prolong his miserable life.  
This indeed, they say, is how he lives.  
And no one comes near to cure him.

*Chorus*

Yes, for my part I pity him:  
how unhappy, how utterly alone, always  
he suffers the savagery of his illness  
with no one to care for him,  
with no friendly face near him,  
but bewildered and distraught at each need as it comes  
God pity him, how has he kept a grip on life?

170

Woe to the contrivances of death-bound men,  
woe to the unhappy generations of death-bound men  
whose lives have known extremes!

Perhaps this man is as well born as any,  
second to no son of an ancient house.  
Yet now his life lacks everything,  
and he makes his bed without neighbors  
or with spotted shaggy beasts for neighbors.  
His thoughts are set continually on pain and hunger.  
He cries out in his wretchedness;  
there is only a blabbering echo,  
that comes from the distance speeding  
from his bitter crying.

180

190

*Neoptolemus*

I am not surprised at any of this:  
this is a God's doing, if I have any understanding.

These afflictions that have come upon him  
are the work of Chryse, bitter of heart.  
As for his present loneliness and suffering,  
this, too, no doubt is part of the God's plan  
that he may not bend against Troy  
the divine invincible bow  
until the time shall be fulfilled, at which it is decreed,  
that Troy, as they say, shall fall to that bow

200

*Chorus*

Hush.

*Neoptolemus*

What is it?

*Chorus*

Hush! I hear a footfall,  
footfall of a man that walks painfully.  
Is it here? Is it here?  
I hear a voice, now I can hear it clearly,  
voice of a man, crawling along the path,  
hard put to it to move. It's far away,  
but I can hear it, I can hear the sound well  
the voice of a man wounded; it is quite clear now.

No more now, my son.

210

*Neoptolemus*

No more of what?

*Chorus*

Your plots and plans. He is here, almost with us.  
His is no cheerful marching to the pipe  
like a shepherd with his flock.  
No, a bitter cry.  
He must have stumbled far down on the path,  
and his moaning carried all the way here.  
Or perhaps he stopped to look at the empty harbor,  
for it was a bitter cry.

*Philoctetes*

Men, who are you that have put in, rowing  
to a shore without houses or anchorage?  
What countrymen may I call you without offense?  
What is your people? Greeks, indeed, you seem  
in fashion of your clothing, dear to me.  
May I hear your voice? Do not be afraid  
or shrink from such as I am, grown a savage.  
I have been alone and very wretched,  
without friend or comrade, suffering a great deal.  
Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,  
speak if you come as friends.

220

No—answer me.

230

If this is all  
that we can have from one another, speech,  
this, at least, we should have.

*Neoptolemus*

Sir, for your questions, since you wish to know,  
know we are Greeks.

*Philoctetes*

Friendliest of tongues!

That I should hear it spoken once again  
by such a man in such a place! My boy,  
who are you? Who has sent you here? What brought you?  
What impulse? What friendliest of winds?  
Tell me all this, that I know who you are.

*Neoptolemus*

I am of Scyrus that the sea surrounds;  
I am sailing home. My name is Neoptolemus,  
Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

240

*Philoctetes*

Son of a father—that I loved so dearly—  
and of a country that I loved, you that were reared  
by that old man Lycomedes, what kind of venture  
can have brought you to port here? Where did you sail from?

*Neoptolemus*

At present bound from Troy

*Philoctetes*

From Troy? From Troy!

You did not sail with us to Troy at first.

*Neoptolemus*

You, then, are one that also had a share  
in all that trouble?

*Philoctetes*

Is it possible  
you do not know me, boy, me whom you see here?

*Neoptolemus*

I never saw you before How could I know you?

250

*Philoctetes*

You never heard my name then? Never a rumor  
of all the wrongs I suffered, even to death?

*Neoptolemus*

I never knew a word of what you ask me.

*Philoctetes*

Surely I must be vile! God must have hated me  
that never a word of me, of how I live here,  
should have come home through all the land of Greece.  
Yet they that outraged God casting me away  
can hold their tongues and laugh! While my disease  
always increases and grows worse. My boy,  
you are Achilles' son. I that stand here  
am one you may have heard of, as the master  
of Heracles' arms. I am Philoctetes  
the son of Poias. Those two generals  
and Prince Odysseus of the Cephallenians  
cast me ashore here to their shame, as lonely  
as you can see me now, wasting with my sickness  
as cruel as it is, caused by the murderous bite  
of a viper mortally dangerous.

260

I was already bitten when we put in here  
on my way from sea-encircled Chryse.  
I tell you, boy, those men cast me away here  
and ran and left me helpless They were happy  
when they saw that I had fallen asleep on the shore  
in a rocky cave, after a rough passage.

270

They went away and left me with such rags—  
and few enough of them—as one might give  
an unfortunate beggar and a handful of food.  
May God give them the like!

Think, boy, of that awakening when I awoke  
and found them gone; think of the useless tears  
and curses on myself when I saw the ships—  
my ships, which I had once commanded—gone,  
all gone, and not a man left on the island,  
not one to help me or to lend a hand  
when I was seized with my sickness, not a man!  
In all I saw before me nothing but pain;  
but of that a great abundance, boy.

280

Time came and went for me. In my tiny shelter  
I must alone do everything for myself.  
This bow of mine I used to shoot the birds  
that filled my belly. I must drag my foot,  
my cursed foot, to where the bolt  
sped by the bow's thong had struck down a bird.  
If I must drink, and it was winter time—  
the water was frozen—I must break up firewood.  
Again I crawled and miserably contrived  
to do the work. Whenever I had no fire,  
rubbing stone on stone I would at last produce  
the spark that kept me still in life.  
A roof for shelter, if only I have fire,  
gives me everything but release from pain.

290

Boy, let me tell you of this island.  
No sailor by his choice comes near it.

300

There is no anchorage, nor anywhere  
that one can land, sell goods, be entertained.  
Sensible men make no voyages here.  
Yet now and then someone puts in. A stretch  
of time as long as this allows much to happen.  
When they have come here, boy, they pity me—  
at least they say they do—and in their pity  
they have given me scraps of food and cast-off clothes,  
that other thing, when I dare mention it,  
none of them will—bringing me home again.

310

It is nine years now that I have spent dying,  
with hunger and pain feeding my insatiable  
disease. That, boy, is what they have done to me,  
the two Atridae, and that mighty Prince  
Odysseus. May the Gods that live in heaven  
grant that they pay, agony for my agony.

*Chorus*

In this, I too resemble your other visitors.  
I pity you, son of Poias.

*Neoptolemus*

I am a witness,  
I also, of the truth of what you say.  
I know it is true. I have dealt with those villains,  
the two Atridae and the prince Odysseus.

320

*Philoctetes*

Are you, as well as I, a sufferer  
and angry? Have you grounds against the Atridae?

*Neoptolemus*

Give me the chance to gratify my anger  
with my hand some day!  
Then will Mycenae know and Sparta know  
that Scyrus, too, breeds soldiers.

*Philoctetes*

Well said, boy!

You come to me with a great hate against them.  
Because of what?

*Neoptolemus*

I will tell you, Philoctetes—  
for all that it hurts to tell it—  
of how I came to Troy and what dishonor  
they put upon me.  
When fatefully Achilles came to die. . . .

330

*Philoctetes*

O stop! tell me no more. Let me understand  
this first. Is he dead, Achilles, dead?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, he is dead; no man his conqueror  
but bested by a god, Phoebus the archer.

*Philoctetes*

Noble was he that killed and he that died.  
Boy, I am at a loss which to do first,  
ask for your story or to mourn for him.

*Neoptolemus*

God help you, I would think that your own sufferings  
were quite enough without mourning for those of others.

340

*Philoctetes*

Yes, that is true. Again, tell me your story  
of how they have insulted you.

*Neoptolemus*

They came  
for me, did great Odysseus and the man  
that was my father's tutor, with a ship  
wonderfully decked with ribbons. They had a story—  
be it truth or lie—that it was God's decree  
since he, my father, was dead, I and I only  
should take Troy town.

This was their story Sir, you can imagine  
 it did not take much time, when they had told it, 350  
 for me to embark with them  
 Chiefly, you know, I was prompted by love of him,  
 the dead man I had hope of seeing him  
 while still unburied Alive I never had  
 We had a favoring wind; on the second day  
 we touched Sigeion. As I disembarked,  
 all of the soldiers swarmed around me, blessed me,  
 swore that they saw Achilles alive again,  
 now gone from them forever But he still lay  
 unburied I, his mourning son, wept for him, 360  
 then, in a while, came to the two Atreidae,  
 my friends, as it seemed right to do, and asked them  
 for my father's arms and all that he had else.  
 They needed brazen faces for their answer  
 "Son of Achilles, all that your father had,  
 all else, is yours to take, but not his arms  
 Another man now owns them, Laertes' son "  
 I burst into tears, jumped up, enraged,  
 cried out in my pain, "You scoundrels, did you dare  
 to give those arms that were mine to someone else 370  
 before I knew of it?" Then Odysseus  
 spoke—he was standing near me—"Yes, and rightly,"  
 he said, "they gave them, boy For it was I  
 who rescued them and him, their former owner "  
 My anger got the better of me; I cursed him outright  
 with every insult that I knew, sparing none,  
 if he should take my arms away from me  
 He is no way given to quarreling, but at this  
 he was stung by what I said He answered  
 "You were not where we were You were at home,  
 out of the reach of duty. Since, besides,  
 you have so bold a tongue in your head, never 380  
 will you possess them to bring home to Scyrus."



There it was, abuse on both sides. But I lost  
 what should be mine and so sailed home. Odysseus,  
 that filthy son of filthy parents, robbed me.  
 Yet I do not blame him even so much as the princes.  
 All of a city is in the hand of the prince,  
 all of an army; unruly men become so  
 by the instruction of their betters.  
 This is the whole tale. May he that hates the Atridae  
 be as dear in the Gods' sight as he is in mine.

390

*Chorus*

Earth, Mountain Mother, in whom we find sustenance,  
 Mother of Zeus himself,  
 Dweller in great golden Pactolus,  
 Mother that I dread  
 on that other day, too, I called on thee, Thou Blessed One,  
 Thou that rides on the Bull-killing Lions,  
 when all the insolence of the Atridae assaulted our Prince,  
 when they gave his arms, that wonder of the world,  
 to the son of Laertes.

400

*Philoctetes*

You have sailed here, as it seems, with a clear tally;  
 your half of sorrow matches that of mine.  
 What you tell me rings in harmony. I recognize  
 the doings of the Atridae and Odysseus.  
 I know Odysseus would employ his tongue  
 on every ill tale, every rascality,  
 that could be brought to issue in injustice.  
 This is not at all my wonder, but that Ajax  
 the Elder should stand by, see and allow it.

410

*Neoptolemus*

He is no longer living, sir; never, indeed,  
 if he were, would they have robbed me of the arms.

*Philoctetes*

What! Is he, too, dead and gone?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, dead and gone. As such now think of him

*Philoctetes*

But not the son of Tydeus nor Odysseus  
whom Sisyphus once sold to Laertes,  
they will not die; for they should not be living.

*Neoptolemus*

Of course, they are not dead; you may be sure  
that they are in their glory among the Greeks.

420

*Philoctetes*

What of an old and honest man, my friend,  
Nestor of Pylos? Is he alive? He used  
to check their mischief by his wise advice

*Neoptolemus*

Things have gone badly for him. He has lost  
his son Antilochus, who once stood by him.

*Philoctetes*

Ah!

You have told me the two deaths that most could hurt me  
Alas, what should I look for  
when Ajax and Antilochus are dead,  
and still Odysseus lives, that in their stead  
ought to be counted among the dead?

430

*Neoptolemus*

A cunning wrestler; still, Philoctetes,  
even the cunning are sometimes tripped up

*Philoctetes*

Tell me, by the Gods, where was Patroclus,  
who was your father's dearest friend?

*Neoptolemus*

Dead, too.

In one short sentence I can tell you this.  
War never takes a bad man but by chance,  
the good man always.

*Philoctetes*

You have said the truth.

So I will ask you of one quite unworthy  
but dexterous and clever with his tongue.

440

*Neoptolemus*

Whom can you mean except Odysseus?

*Philoctetes*

It is not he: there was a man, Thersites,  
who never was content to speak once only,  
though no one was for letting him speak at all.  
Do you know if he is still alive?

*Neoptolemus*

I did not know him,  
but I have heard that he is still alive.

*Philoctetes*

He would be; nothing evil has yet perished.  
The Gods somehow give them most excellent care.  
They find their pleasure in turning back from Death  
the rogues and tricksters, but the just and good  
they are always sending out of the world.  
How can I reckon the score, how can I praise,  
when praising Heaven I find the Gods are bad?

450

*Neoptolemus*

For my own part, Philoctetes of Oeta,  
from now on I shall take precautions.  
I shall look at Troy and the Atridae both  
from very far off. I shall never abide  
the company of those where the worse man  
has more power than the better, where the good  
are always on the wane and cowards rule.  
For the future, rocky Scyrus will content me  
to take my pleasure at home.  
Now I will be going to my ship. Philoctetes,  
on you God's blessing and goodbye. May the Gods

460

recover you of your sickness, as you would have it!  
Let us go, men, that when God grants us sailing  
we may be ready to sail.

*Philoctetes*

Boy, are you going,  
going now?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, the weather favors.  
We must look to sail almost at once.

*Philoctetes*

My dear—I beg you in your father's name,  
and in your mother's, in the name of all  
that you have loved at home, do not leave me here  
alone, living in sufferings you have seen  
and others I have told you of.

470

I am not your main concern; give me a passing thought.  
I know that there is horrible discomfort  
in having me on board. Put up with it.  
To such as you and your nobility,  
meanness is shameful, decency honorable.  
If you leave me here, it is an ugly story.  
If you take me, men will say their best of you,  
if I shall live to see Oetean land.

Come! One day, hardly one whole day's space  
that I shall trouble you. Endure this much.

480

Take me and put me where you will,  
in the hold, in the prow or poop, anywhere  
where I shall least offend those that I sail with.  
By Zeus himself, God of the Suppliants,  
I beg you, boy, say "Yes," say you will do it.  
Here I am on my knees to you, poor cripple,  
for all my lameness. Do not cast me away  
so utterly alone, where no one even walks by.  
Either take me and set me safe in your own home,  
or take me to Chalcedon in Euboea.

From there it will be no great journey for me  
 to Oeta or to ridgy Trachis or  
 to quick-flowing Spercheius,  
 and so you show me to my loving father.  
 For many a day I have feared that he is dead.  
 With those who came to my island I sent messages,  
 and many of them, begging him to come  
 and bring me home himself Either he's dead,  
 or, as I rather think, my messengers  
 made little of what I asked them and hurried home.  
 Now in you I have found both escort and messenger;  
 bring me safe home. Take pity on me.  
 Look how men live, always precariously  
 balanced between good and bad fortune.  
 If you are out of trouble, watch for danger  
 And when you live well, then consider the most  
 your life, lest ruin take it unawares.

*Chorus*

Have pity on him, prince.  
 He has told us of a most desperate course run.  
 God forbid such things should overtake friends of mine.  
 And, prince, if you hate the abominable Atridae  
 I would set their ill treatment of him  
 to his gain and would carry him  
 in your quick, well-fitted ship  
 to his home and so avoid offense before the face of God.

*Neoptolemus*

Take care that your assent is not too ready,  
 and that, when you have enough of his diseased company,  
 you are no longer constant to what you have said.

*Chorus*

No. You will never be able in this  
 to reproach me with justice.

*Neoptolemus*

I should be ashamed  
to be less ready than you to render a stranger service  
Well, if you will then, let us sail Let him  
get ready quickly. My ship will carry him

May God give us a safe clearance from this land  
and a safe journey where we choose to go

*Philoctetes*

God bless this day!  
Man, dear to my very heart,  
and you, dear friends, how shall I prove to you  
how you have bound me to your friendship!  
Let us go, boy. But let us first kiss the earth,  
reverently, in my homeless home of a cave.  
I would have you know what I have lived from,  
how tough the spirit that did not break I think  
the sight itself would have been enough for anyone  
except myself Necessity has taught me,  
little by little, to suffer and be patient.

530

*Chorus*

Wait! Let us see. Two men are coming  
One of them is of our crew, the other a foreigner.  
Let us hear from them and then go in

540

*(Enter the Sailor disguised as a Trader.)*

*Trader*

Son of Achilles, I told my fellow traveler here—  
he with two others were guarding your ship—  
to tell me where you were. I happened on you.  
I had no intentions this way. Just by accident  
I came to anchor at this island.  
I am sailing in command of a ship outward bound  
from Ilium, with no great company, for Peparethus—  
a good country, that, for wine. When I heard  
that all those sailors were the crew of your ship,

550

I thought I should not hold my tongue and sail on  
until I spoke with you—and got my reward,  
a fair one, doubtless. Apparently you do not know  
much of your own affairs, nor what new plans  
the Greeks have for you. Indeed, not only plans,  
actions in train already and not slowly.

*Neoptolemus*

Thank you for your consideration, sir.  
I will remain obliged to your kindness  
unless I prove unworthy. Please tell me  
what you have spoken of. I would like to know  
what are these new plans of the Greeks.

560

*Trader*

Old Phoenix and the two sons of Theseus are gone,  
pursuing you with a squadron.

*Neoptolemus*

Do they intend  
to bring me back with violence or persuade me?

*Trader*

I do not know. I tell you what I heard.

*Neoptolemus*

Are Phoenix and his friends in such a hurry  
to do the bidding of the two Atridae?

*Trader*

It is being done.  
There is no delay about it. That you should know.

*Neoptolemus*

How is it that Odysseus was not ready  
to sail as his own messenger on such  
an errand? It cannot be he was afraid?

*Trader*

When I weighed anchor, he and Tydeus' son  
were in pursuit of still another man.

570

*Neoptolemus*

Who was this other man that Odysseus himself should seek him?

*Trader*

There was a man—perhaps you will tell me first  
who this is; and say softly what you say.

*Neoptolemus*

This, sir, is the famous Philoctetes.

*Trader*

Do not  
ask me any further questions. Get yourself out,  
as quickly as you can, out of this island.

*Philoctetes*

What does he say, boy? Why in dark whispers  
does he bargain with you about me, this sailor?

*Neoptolemus*

I do not know yet what he says, but he must say it,  
openly, whatever it is, to you and me and these

580

*Trader*

Son of Achilles, do not slander me,  
speaking of me to the army as a tattler.  
There's many a thing I do for them and in return  
get something from them, as a poor man may.

*Neoptolemus*

I am the enemy of the Atridae. This  
is my greatest friend because he hates the Atridae.  
You have come to me as a friend, and so you must  
hide from me nothing that you heard.

*Trader*

Well, watch what you are doing, sir.

*Neoptolemus*

I have.

*Trader*

I put the whole responsibility  
squarely upon yourself.



*Neoptolemus*

Do so; but speak.

590

*Trader*

Well, then. The two I have spoken of,  
the son of Tydeus and the Prince Odysseus,  
are in pursuit of Philoctetes.  
They have sworn, so help them God, to bring him with them  
either by persuasion or by brute force.  
And this all the Greeks heard clearly announced  
by Prince Odysseus; for he was much surer  
of success than was the other.

*Neoptolemus*

What can have made  
the Atridae care about him after so long—  
one whom they, years and years since, cast away?  
What yearning for him came over them? Was it the Gods  
who punish evil doings that now have driven them  
to retribution for injustice?

600

*Trader*

I will explain all that. Perhaps you haven't heard.  
There was a prophet of very good family,  
a son of Priam indeed, called Helenus.  
He was captured one night in an expedition  
undertaken singlehanded by Odysseus,  
of whom all base and shameful things are spoken,  
captured by stratagem. Odysseus brought  
his prisoner before the Greeks, a splendid prize.  
Helenus prophesied everything to them  
and, in particular, touching the fortress of Troy,  
that they could never take it till they persuaded  
Philoctetes to come with them and leave his island.  
As soon as Odysseus heard the prophet say this,  
he promised at once to bring the man before them,  
for all to see—he thought, as a willing prisoner,  
but, if not that, against his will. If he failed,

610

“any of them might have his head,” he declared. My boy,  
that is the whole story; that is why I urge you  
and him and any that you care for to make haste.

620

*Philoctetes*

Ah!

Did he indeed swear that he would persuade me  
to sail with him, did he so, that utter devil?

As soon shall I be persuaded, when I am dead,  
to rise from Death's house, come to the light again,  
as his own father did.

*Trader*

I do not know about that. Well, I will be going now  
to my ship. May God prosper you both!

(Exit Trader.)

*Philoctetes*

Is it not terrible, boy, that this Odysseus  
should think that there are words soft enough to win me,  
to let him put me in his boat, exhibit me  
in front of all the Greeks?

630

No! I would rather listen to my worst enemy,  
the snake that bit me, made me into this cripple.

But he can say anything, he can dare anything.

Now I know that he will come here.

Boy, let us go, that a great sea may sever  
us from Odysseus' ship.

Let us go. For look, haste in due season shown  
brings rest and peace when once the work is done.

*Neoptolemus*

When the wind at our prow falls, we can sail, no sooner.

Now it is dead against us.

640

*Philoctetes*

It is always fair sailing, when you escape evil.

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, but the wind is against them, too.

*Philoctetes*

For pirates  
when they can thieve and plunder, no wind is contrary.

*Neoptolemus*

If you will, then, let us go. Take from your cave  
what you need most and love most.

*Philoctetes*

There are some things I need, but no great choice.

*Neoptolemus*

What is there that you will not find on board?

*Philoctetes*

A herb I have, the chief means to soothe my wound,  
to lull the pain to sleep.

650

*Neoptolemus*

Bring it out then.  
What else is there that you would have?

*Philoctetes*

Any arrow  
I may have dropped and missed. For none of them  
must I leave for another to pick up.

*Neoptolemus*

Is this, in your hands, the famous bow?

*Philoctetes*

Yes, this,  
this in my hands.

*Neoptolemus*

May I see it closer,  
touch and adore it like a god?

*Philoctetes*

You may have it  
and anything else of mine that is for your good.

*Neoptolemus*

I long for it, yet only with such longing

660

that if it is lawful, I may have it, else  
let it be.

*Philoctetes*

Your words are holy, boy It is lawful  
for you have given me, and you alone,  
the sight of the sun shining above us here,  
the sight of my Oeta, of my old father, my friends  
You have raised me up above my enemies,  
when I was under their feet. You may be confident.  
You may indeed touch my bow, give it again  
to me that gave it you, proclaim that alone  
of all the world you touched it, in return  
for the good deed you did. It was for that,  
for friendly help, I myself won it first.

670

*Neoptolemus*

I am glad to see you and take you as a friend.  
For one who knows how to show and to accept kindness  
will be a friend better than any possession  
Go in.

*Philoctetes*

I will bring you with me. The sickness in me  
seeks to have you beside me.

*Chorus*

In story I have heard, but my eyes have not seen  
him that once would have drawn near to Zeus's bed.  
I have heard how he caught him, bound him on a running wheel,  
Zeus, son of Kronos, invincible.  
But I know of no other,  
by hearsay, much less by sight, of all mankind  
whose destiny was more his enemy when he met it  
than Philoctetes', who wronged no one, nor killed  
but lived, just among the just,  
and fell in trouble past his deserts.  
There is wonder, indeed, in my heart  
how, how in his loneliness,

680

listening to the waves beating on the shore,  
how he kept hold at all  
on a life so full of tears.

690

He was lame, and no one came near him  
He suffered, and there were no neighbors for his sorrow  
with whom his cries would find answer,  
with whom he could lament the bloody plague  
that ate him up.

No one who would gather  
fallen leaves from the ground  
to quiet the raging, bleeding sore,  
running, in his maggot-rotten foot.

700

Here and there he crawled  
writhing always—  
suffering like a child  
without the nurse he loves—  
to what source of ease he could find  
when the heart-devouring suffering gave over.

No grain sown in holy earth was his, nor other food  
of all enjoyed by us, men who live by labor,  
save when with the feathered arrows shot by the quick bow  
he got him fodder for his belly.

710

Alas, poor soul,  
that never in ten years' length  
enjoyed a drink of wine  
but looked always for the standing pools  
and approached them.

But now he will end fortunate. He has fallen in  
with the son of good men. He will be great, after it all.  
Our prince in his seaworthy craft will carry him  
after the fulness of many months, to his father's home  
in the country of the Malian nymphs,  
by the banks of the Spercheius,

720

where the hero of the bronze shield ascended  
to all the Gods, ablaze in holy fire  
above the ridges of Oeta.

*Neoptolemus*

Come if you will, then. Why have you nothing to say?  
Why do you stand, in silence transfixed?

730

*Philoctetes*

Oh! Oh!

*Neoptolemus*

What is it?

*Philoctetes*

Nothing to be afraid of. Come on, boy.

*Neoptolemus*

Is it the pain of your inveterate sickness?

*Philoctetes*

No, no, indeed not. Just now I think I feel better.  
O Gods!

*Neoptolemus*

Why do you call on the Gods with cries of distress?

*Philoctetes*

That they may come as healers, come with gentleness.  
Oh! Oh!

*Neoptolemus*

What ails you? Tell me; do not keep silence.  
You are clearly in some pain.

740

*Philoctetes*

I am lost, boy.  
I will not be able to hide it from you longer.  
Oh! Oh!  
It goes through me, right through me!  
Miserable, miserable!  
I am lost, boy. I am being eaten up. Oh!

By God, if you have a sword, ready to hand, use it!  
Strike the end of my foot Strike it off, I tell you, now.  
Do not spare my life. Quick, boy, quick.

750

(*A long silence.*)

*Neoptolemus*

What is this thing that comes upon you suddenly,  
that makes you cry and moan so?

*Philoctetes*

Do you know, boy?

*Neoptolemus*

What is it?

*Philoctetes*

Do you know, boy?

*Neoptolemus*

What do you mean?

I do not know.

*Philoctetes*

Surely you know. Oh! Oh!

*Neoptolemus*

The terrible burden of your sickness.

*Philoctetes*

Terrible it is, beyond words' reach. But pity me.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall I do?

*Philoctetes*

Do not be afraid and leave me.

She comes from time to time, perhaps when she has had  
her fill of wandering in other places.

*Neoptolemus*

You most unhappy man,  
you that have endured all agonies, lived through them,  
shall I take hold of you? Shall I touch you?

760

*Philoctetes*

Not that, above everything. But take this bow,  
as you asked to do just now, until the pain,  
the pain of my sickness, that is now upon me, grows less.  
Keep the bow, guard it safely. Sleep comes upon me  
when the attack is waning. The pain will not end till then.  
But you must let me sleep quietly.  
If they should come in the time when I sleep,  
by the Gods I beg you do not give up my bow  
willingly or unwillingly to anyone.  
And let no one trick you out of it, lest you prove  
a murderer—your own and mine that kneeled to you.

770

*Neoptolemus*

I shall take care; be easy about that. It shall not pass  
except to your hands and to mine. Give it to me now,  
and may good luck go with it!

*Philoctetes*

Here,  
take it, boy. Bow in prayer to the Gods' envy  
that the bow may not be to you a sorrow  
nor as it was to me and its former master.

*Neoptolemus*

You Gods, grant us both this and grant us  
a journey speedy with a prosperous wind  
to where God sends us and our voyage holds.

780

*Philoctetes*

An empty prayer, I am afraid, boy:  
the blood is trickling, dripping murderously  
from its deep spring. I look for something new.  
It is coming now, coming. Ah!  
You have the bow. Do not go away from me.

Ah!

O man of Cephallenia, would it were you,  
Would it were your breast that the pains transfix.

Ah!

790



Agamemnon and Menelaus, my two generals,  
would it were your two bodies that had fed  
this sickness for as long as mine has. Ah!

Death, death, how is it that I can call on you,  
always, day in, day out, and you cannot come to me?  
Boy, my good boy, take up this body of mine  
and burn it on what they call the Lemnian fire.  
I had the resolution once to do this for another,  
the son of Zeus, and so obtained the arms  
that you now hold. What do you say?  
What do you say? Nothing? Where are you, boy?

800

*Neoptolemus*

I have been in pain for you; I have been  
in sorrow for your pain.

*Philoctetes*

No, boy, keep up your heart. She is quick in coming  
and quick to go. Only I entreat you, do not  
leave me alone.

*Neoptolemus*

Do not be afraid. We shall stay.

810

*Philoctetes*

You will?

*Neoptolemus*

You may be sure of it.

*Philoctetes*

Your oath,  
I do not think it fit to put you to your oath.

*Neoptolemus*

I may not go without you, Philoctetes.

*Philoctetes*

Give me your hand upon it.

*Neoptolemus*

Here I give it you,  
to remain.

*Philoctetes*

Now—take me away from here—

*Neoptolemus*

What do you mean?

*Philoctetes*

Up, up.

*Neoptolemus*

What madness is upon you? Why do you look  
on the sky above us?

*Philoctetes*

Let me go, let me go.

*Neoptolemus*

Where?

*Philoctetes*

Oh, let me go.

*Neoptolemus*

Not I.

*Philoctetes*

You will kill me if you touch me.

*Neoptolemus*

Now I shall let you go, now you are calmer.

*Philoctetes*

Earth, take my body, dying as I am.

The pain no longer lets me stand.

820

*Neoptolemus*

In a little while, I think,  
sleep will come on this man. His head is nodding.  
The sweat is soaking all his body over,  
and a black flux of blood and matter has broken  
out of his foot. Let us leave him quiet, friends,  
until he falls asleep.

*Chorus*

Sleep that knows not pain nor suffering  
kindly upon us, Lord,  
kindly, kindly come  
Spread your enveloping radiance, 830  
as now, over his eyes  
Come, come, Lord Healer.

Boy, look to your standing,  
look to your going, look to your plans  
for the future. Do you see? He sleeps.  
What is it we are waiting to do?  
Ripeness that holds decision over all things  
wins many a victory suddenly.

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, it is true he hears nothing, but I see we have hunted in vain,  
vainly have captured our quarry the bow, if we sail without him. 840  
His is the crown of victory, him the God said we must bring.  
Shame shall be ours if we boast and our lies still leave victory  
unwon.

*Chorus*

Boy, to all of this the God shall look.  
Answer me gently;  
low, low, whisper,  
whisper, boy.  
The sleep of a sick man has keen eyes.  
It is a sleep unsleeping.

But to the limits of what you can,  
look to this, look to this secretly, 850  
how you may do it.  
You know of whom I speak.  
If your mind holds the same purpose touching this man,  
the wise can see trouble and no way to cure it.  
It is a fair wind, boy, a fair wind:  
the man is eyeless and helpless,

outstretched under night's blanket—  
 asleep in the sun is good—  
 neither of foot nor of hand nor of anything is he master, 860  
 but is even as one that lies in Death's house.  
 Look to it, look if what you say  
 is seasonable. As far as my mind,  
 boy, can grasp it, best is the trouble taken  
 that causes the least fear.

*Neoptolemus*

Quiet, I tell you! Are you mad? He is stirring,  
 his eyes are stirring; he is raising his head.

*Philoctetes*

Blessed the light that comes after my sleep,  
 blessed the watching of friends.  
 I never would have hoped this,  
 that you would have the pity of heart to support 870  
 my afflictions, that you should stand by me and help.  
 The Atridae, those brave generals, were not so,  
 they could not so easily put up with me.  
 You have a noble nature, Neoptolemus,  
 and noble were your parents. You have made light  
 of all of this—the offense of my cries and the smell.  
 And now, since it would seem I can forget  
 my sickness for a while and rest, raise me yourself,  
 raise me up, boy, and set me on my feet,  
 that when my weariness releases me,  
 we can go to the ship and sail without delay. 880

*Neoptolemus*

I am glad to see you unexpectedly,  
 eyes open, free of pain, still with the breath of life.  
 With suffering like yours, all the signs pointed  
 to your being dead. Now, lift yourself up.  
 If you would rather, these men will lift you. They  
 will spare no trouble, since you and I are agreed.

*Philoctetes*

Thanks, boy. Lift me yourself, as you thought of it.  
Do not trouble them, let them not be disquieted  
before they need by the foul smell of me; living  
on board with me will try their patience enough

890

*Neoptolemus*

Very well, then; stand on your feet; take hold yourself

*Philoctetes*

Do not be afraid; old habit will help me up.

*Neoptolemus*

Now is the moment What shall I do from now on?

*Philoctetes*

What is it, boy? Where are your words straying?

*Neoptolemus*

I do not know what to say I am at a loss

*Philoctetes*

Why are you at a loss? Do not say so, boy.

*Neoptolemus*

It is indeed my case.

*Philoctetes*

Is it disgust at my sickness? Is it this  
that makes you shrink from taking me?

900

*Neoptolemus*

All is disgust when one leaves his own nature  
and does things that misfit it.

*Philoctetes*

It is not unlike your father, either in word  
or in act, to help a good man.

*Neoptolemus*

I shall be shown to be dishonorable:  
I am afraid of that.

*Philoctetes*

Not in your present actions. Your words make me hesitate.

*Neoptolemus*

Zeus, what must I do? Twice be proved base,  
hiding what I should not, saying what is most foul?

*Philoctetes*

Unless I am wrong, here is a man who will  
betray me, leave me—so it seems—and sail away.

910

*Neoptolemus*

Not I; I will not leave you. To your bitterness,  
I shall send you on a journey—and I dread this.

*Philoctetes*

What are you saying, boy? I do not understand.

*Neoptolemus*

I will not hide anything. You must sail to Troy  
to the Achaeans, join the army of the Atreidae.

*Philoctetes*

What! What can you mean?

*Neoptolemus*

Do not cry yet  
until you learn.

*Philoctetes*

Learn what? What would you do with me?

*Neoptolemus*

First save you from this torture, then with you  
go and lay waste the land of Troy.

920

*Philoctetes*

You would?  
This is, in truth, what you intend?

*Neoptolemus*

Necessity,  
a great necessity compels it. Do not be angry.

*Philoctetes*

Then I am lost. I am betrayed. Why, stranger,  
have you done this to me? Give me back my bow

*Neoptolemus*

That I cannot. Justice and interest  
make me obedient to those in authority

*Philoctetes*

You fire, you every horror, most hateful engine  
of ruthless mischief, what have you done to me,  
what treachery! Have you no shame to see me  
that kneeled to you, entreated you, hard of heart?

930

You robbed me of my livelihood, taking my bow.  
Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I pray, my boy!  
By your father's Gods, do not take my livelihood  
He does not say a word,  
but turns away his eyes He will not give it up

Caverns and headlands, dens of wild creatures,  
you jutting broken crags, to you I raise my cry—  
there is no one else that I can speak to—  
and you have always been there, have always heard me,  
Let me tell you what he has done to me, this boy,  
Achilles' son. He swore to bring me home;  
he brings me to Troy He gave me his right hand,  
then took and keeps my sacred bow,  
the bow of Heracles, the son of Zeus,  
and means to show it to the Argives,  
as though in me he had conquered a strong man,  
as though he led me captive to his power.  
He does not know he is killing one that is dead,  
a kind of vaporous shadow, a mere wraith.  
Had I had my strength, he had not conquered me,  
for, even as I am, it was craft that did it  
I have been deceived and am lost.  
What can I do?

940

Give it back. Be your true self again. Will you not?  
No word. Then I am nothing.

950

Two doors cut in the rock, to you again,  
again I come, enter again, unarmed,  
no means to feed myself! Here in this passage  
I shall shrivel to death alone. I shall kill no more,  
neither winged bird nor wild thing of the hills  
with this my bow. I shall myself in death  
be a feast for those that fed me. Those that I hunted  
shall be my hunters now.  
Life for the life I took, I shall repay  
at the hands of this man that seemed to know no harm.

960

My curse upon your life!—but not yet still  
until I know if you will change again;  
if you will not, may an evil death be yours!

*Chorus*

What shall we do? Shall we sail? Shall we do as he asks?  
Prince, it is you must decide.

*Neoptolemus*

A kind of compassion,  
a terrible compassion, has come upon me  
for him. I have felt for him all the time.

*Philoctetes*

Pity me, boy, by the Gods; do not bring on yourself  
men's blame for your crafty victory over me.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall I do? I would I had never left  
Scyrus, so hateful is what I face now.

970

*Philoctetes*

You are not bad yourself; by bad men's teaching  
you came to practice your foul lesson. Leave it to others  
such as it suits, and sail away. Give me my arms.



*Neoptolemus*

What shall we do, men?

(*Odysseus appears.*)

*Odysseus*

Scoundrel, what are you doing? Give me those arms.

*Philoctetes*

Who is this? Is that Odysseus' voice?

*Odysseus*

It is.

Odysseus certainly; you can see him here.

*Philoctetes*

Then I have been sold indeed; I am lost. It was he  
who took me prisoner, robbed me of my arms

*Odysseus*

Yes, I, I and no other. I admit that.

980

*Philoctetes*

Boy, give me back my bow, give it back to me.

*Odysseus*

That he will never  
be able to do now, even if he wishes it.  
And you must come with the bow, or these will  
bring you.

*Philoctetes*

Your wickedness and impudence are without limit.  
Will these men bring me, then, against my will?

*Odysseus*

Yes, if you do not come with a good grace.

*Philoctetes*

O land of Lemnos and all mastering brightness,  
Hephaestus-fashioned, must I indeed bear this,  
that he, Odysseus, drags me from you with violence?

*Odysseus*

It is Zeus, I would have you know, Zeus this land's ruler,  
who has determined. I am only his servant.

990

*Philoctetes*

Hateful creature,  
what things you can invent! You plead the Gods  
to screen your actions and make the Gods out liars.

*Odysseus*

They speak the truth The road must be traveled.

*Philoctetes*

I say No.

*Odysseus*

I say Yes. You must listen.

*Philoctetes*

Are we slaves and not free? Is it as such  
our fathers have begotten us?

*Odysseus*

No, but as equals  
of the best, with whom it is destined you must take Troy,  
dig her down stone by stone.

*Philoctetes*

Never, I would rather suffer anything than this.  
There is still my steep and rugged precipice here.

1000

*Odysseus*

What do you mean to do?

*Philoctetes*

Throw myself down,  
shatter my head upon the rock below.

*Odysseus*

Hold him. Take this solution out of his power.

*Philoctetes*

Hands of mine, quarry of Odysseus' hunting,  
now suffer in your lack of the loved bowstring!

You who have never had a healthy thought  
nor noble, you Odysseus, how you have hunted me,  
how you have stolen upon me with this boy

as your shield, because I did not know him, one  
 that is no mate for you but worthy of me,  
 who knows nothing but to do what he was bidden, 1010  
 and now, you see, is suffering bitterly  
 for his own faults and what he brought on me.  
 Your shabby, slit-eyed soul taught him step by step  
 to be clever in mischief against his nature and will.  
 Now it is my turn, now to my sorrow you have me  
 bound hand and foot, intend to take me away,  
 away from this shore on which you cast me once  
 without friends or comrades or city, a dead man among the living.

My curse on you! I have often cursed you before,  
 but the Gods give me nothing that is sweet to me. 1020  
 You have joy to be alive, and I have sorrow  
 because my very life is linked to this pain,  
 laughed at by you and your two generals,  
 the sons of Atreus whom you serve in this.  
 And yet, when you sailed with them, it was by constraint  
 and trickery, while I came of my own free will  
 with seven ships, to my undoing, I  
 whom they dishonored and cast away—  
 you say it was they that did it and they you.

But now why are you taking me? For what?  
 I am nothing now. To you all I have long been dead. 1030  
 God-hated wretch, how is it that now I am not  
 lame and foul-smelling? How can you burn your sacrifice  
 to God if I sail with you? Pour your libations?  
 This was your excuse for casting me away.

May death in ugly form come on you! It will so come,  
 for you have wronged me, if the Gods care for justice.  
 And I know that they do care for it, for at present  
 you never would have sailed here for my sake  
 and my happiness, had not the goad of God,

a need of me, compelled you.

Land of my fathers, Gods that look on men's deeds,  
take vengeance on these men, in your own good time,  
upon them all, if you have pity on me!

1040

Wretchedly as I live, if I saw them  
dead, I could dream that I was free of my sickness

*Chorus*

He is a hard man, Odysseus, this stranger,  
and hard his words: no yielding to suffering in them

*Odysseus*

If I had the time, I have much I could say to him.  
As it is, there is only one thing As the occasion  
demands, such a one am I.

When there is a competition of men just and good,  
you will find none more scrupulous than myself.

1050

What I seek in everything is to win  
except in your regard: I willingly yield to you now.

Let him go, men. Do not lay a finger on him.

Let him stay here. We have these arms of yours  
and do not need you, Philoctetes.

Teucer is with us who has the skill and I,  
who, I think, am no meaner master of them  
and have as straight an aim. Why do we need you?

Farewell: pace Lemnos. Let us go. Perhaps  
your prize will bring me the honor you should have had.

1060

*Philoctetes*

What shall I do? Will you appear  
before the Argives in the glory of my arms?

*Odysseus*

Say nothing further to me. I am going.

*Philoctetes*

Your voice has no word for me, son of Achilles?  
Will you go away in silence?

*Odysseus*

Come, Neoptolemus.

Do not look at him. Your generosity  
may spoil our future.

*Philoctetes*

You, too, men, will you go  
and leave me alone? Do you, too, have no pity?

1070

*Chorus*

This young man is our captain. What he says to you  
we say as well.

*Neoptolemus (to the Chorus)*

Odysseus will tell me  
that I am full of pity for him. Still  
remain, if he will have it so, as long  
as it takes the sailors to ready the tackle  
and until we have made our prayer to the Gods.  
Perhaps, in the meantime, he will have better thoughts  
about us. Let us go, Odysseus.

You, when we call you, be quick to come.

1080

*(Exeunt Odysseus and Neoptolemus.)*

*Philoctetes*

Hollow in the rock, hollow cave, sun-warmed, ice cold,  
I was not destined, after all, ever to leave you.  
Still with me, you shall be witness to my dying.  
Passageway, crowded with my cries of pain,  
what shall be, now again, my daily life with you?  
What hope shall I find of food to keep my wretched life alive?  
Above me, in the clouds, down the shrill winds  
the birds; no strength in me to stop them.

1090

*Chorus*

It was you who doomed yourself,  
man of hard fortune. From no other,  
from nothing stronger, came your mischance.  
When you could have chosen wisdom,

with better opportunity before you,  
you chose the worse

1100

*Philoctetes*

Sorrow, sorrow is mine. Suffering has broken me,  
who must live henceforth alone from all the world,  
must live here and die here;  
no longer bringing home food nor winning  
it with strong hands. Unmarked, the crafty words  
of a treacherous heart stole on me Would I might see him,  
contriver of this trap,  
for as long as I am, condemned to pain.

1110

*Chorus*

It was the will of the Gods  
that has subdued you, no craft  
to which my hand was lent.  
Turn your hate, your ill-omened curses, elsewhere.  
This indeed lies near my heart,  
that you should not reject my friendship.

1120

*Philoctetes*

By the shore of the gray sea he sits and laughs at me.  
He brandishes in his hand the weapon which kept me alive,  
which no one else had handled. Bow that I loved,  
forged from the hands that loved you, if you could feel,  
you would see me with pity, successor to Heracles,  
that used you and shall handle you no more.  
You have found a new master, a man of craft, and shall be bent  
by him.  
You shall see crooked deceits and the face of my hateful foe,  
and a thousand ill things such as he contrived against me.

1130

*Chorus*

A man should give careful heed to say what is just;  
and when he has said it, restrain his tongue from rancor and taunt.  
Odysseus was one man, appointed by many,  
by their command he has done this, a service to his friends.

1140

*Philoctetes*

Birds my victims, tribes of bright-eyed wild creatures,  
tenants of these hills, you need not flee from me or my house.  
No more the strength of my hands, of my bow, is mine. 1150  
Come! It is a good time  
to glut yourselves freely on my discolored flesh.  
For shortly I shall die here. How shall I find means of life?  
Who can live on air without any of all that life-giving earth sup-  
plies? 1160

*Chorus*

In the name of the gods, if there is anything that you hold in re-  
spect,  
draw near to a friend that approaches you in all sincerity.  
Know what you are doing, know it well.  
It lies with you to avoid your doom.  
It is a destiny pitiable to feed  
with your body. It cannot learn how  
to endure the thousand burdens with which it is coupled.

*Philoctetes*

Again, again you have touched my old hurt, 1170  
for all that you are the best of those that came here.  
Why did you afflict me? What have you done to me?

*Chorus*

What do you mean by this?

*Philoctetes*

Yes, you have hoped to bring me  
to the hateful land of Troy

*Chorus*

I judge that to be best.

*Philoctetes*

Then leave me now at once.

*Chorus*

Glad news, glad news.  
I am right willing to obey you.  
Let us go now to our places in the ship. 1180

*Philoctetes*

No, by the God that listens to curses, do not go,  
I beseech you.

*Chorus*

Be calm!

*Philoctetes*

Friends, stay!

I beg you to stay.

*Chorus*

Why do you call on us?

*Philoctetes*

It is the God, the God. I am destroyed.  
My foot, what shall I do with this foot of mine  
in the life I shall live hereafter?  
Friends, come to me again

1190

*Chorus*

What to do that is different  
from the tenor of your former bidding?

*Philoctetes*

It is no occasion for anger  
when a man crazy with storms of sorrow  
speaks against his better judgment.

*Chorus*

Unhappy man, come with us, as we say.

*Philoctetes*

Never, never! That is my fixed purpose.  
Not though the Lord of the Lightning, bearing his fiery bolts,  
come against me, burning me  
with flame and glare.  
Let Ilium go down and all that under its walls  
had the heart to cast me away, crippled!  
Friends, grant me one prayer only.

1200

*Chorus*

What is it you would seek?



*Philoctetes*

A sword, if you have got one,  
or an ax or some weapon—give it me!

*Chorus*

What would you do with it?

*Philoctetes*

Head and foot,  
head and foot, all of me, I would cut with my own hand.  
My mind is set on death, on death, I tell you.

*Chorus*

Why this?

1210

*Philoctetes*

I would go seek my father.

*Chorus*

Where?

*Philoctetes*

In the house of death.  
He is no longer in the light.  
City of my fathers, would I could see you.  
I who left your holy streams,  
to go help the Greeks, my enemies,  
and now am nothing any more.

*Chorus*

I should have been by now on my way to the ship,  
did I not see Odysseus coming here  
and with him Neoptolemus.

1220

(*Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus in front of the cave, talking.*  
*Philoctetes withdraws into the cave.*)

*Odysseus (to Neoptolemus)*

You have turned back, there is hurry in your step.  
Will you not tell me why?

*Neoptolemus*

I go to undo the wrong that I have done.

*Odysseus*

A strange thing to say! What wrong was that?

*Neoptolemus*

I did wrong when I obeyed you and the Greeks.

*Odysseus*

What did we make you do that was unworthy?

*Neoptolemus*

I practiced craft and treachery with success.

*Odysseus*

On whom? Would you do some rash thing now?

*Neoptolemus*

Nothing rash. I am going to give something back.

1230

*Odysseus*

What? I am afraid to hear what you will say

*Neoptolemus*

Back to the man I took it from, this bow.

*Odysseus*

You cannot mean you are going to give it back.

*Neoptolemus*

Just that. To my shame, unjustly, I obtained it.

*Odysseus*

Can you mean this in earnest?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, unless

it is not in earnest to tell you the truth.

*Odysseus*

What do you mean, Neoptolemus, what are you saying?

*Neoptolemus*

Must I tell you the same story twice or thrice?

*Odysseus*

I should prefer not to have heard it once.

*Neoptolemus*

You can rest easy. You have now heard everything.

1240

*Odysseus*

Then there is someone who will prevent its execution.

*Neoptolemus*

Who will that be?

*Odysseus*

The whole assembly  
of the Greeks and among them I myself.

*Neoptolemus*

You are a clever man, Odysseus, but  
this is not a clever saying.

*Odysseus*

In your own case  
neither the words nor the acts are clever.

*Neoptolemus*

Still  
if they are just, they are better than clever.

*Odysseus*

How can it be just to give to him again  
what you won by my plans?

*Neoptolemus*

It was a sin,  
a shameful sin, which I shall try to retrieve.

*Odysseus*

Have you no fear of the Greeks if you do this?

1250

*Neoptolemus*

I have no fear of anything you can do,  
when I act with justice; nor shall I yield to force.

*Odysseus*

Then we shall fight  
not with the Trojans but with you.

*Neoptolemus*

Let that be as it will.

*Odysseus*

Do you see my hand,  
reaching for the sword?

*Neoptolemus*

You shall see me do as much  
and that at once.

*Odysseus*

I will let you alone;  
I shall go and tell this to the assembled Greeks,  
and they will punish you.

*Neoptolemus*

That is very prudent  
If you are always as prudent as this,  
perhaps you will keep out of trouble

1260

*(Exit Odysseus.)*

I call on you, Philoctetes, son of Poias,  
come from your cave.

*(Philoctetes appears at the mouth of the cave.)*

*Philoctetes*

What cry is this at the door?  
Why do you call me forth, friends? What would you have?  
Ah! This is a bad thing. Can there be some fresh mischief  
you come to do, to top what you have done?

*Neoptolemus*

Be easy. I would only have you listen.

*Philoctetes*

I am afraid of that.  
I heard you before, and they were good words, too.  
But they destroyed me when I listened.

*Neoptolemus*

Is there no place, then, for repentance?

1270

*Philoctetes*

You were just such a one in words when you stole my bow,  
inspiring confidence, but sly and treacherous.

*Neoptolemus*

I am not such now But I would hear from you  
whether you are entirely determined  
to remain here, or will you go with us?

*Philoctetes*

Oh, stop! You need not say another word  
All that you say will be wasted.

*Neoptolemus*

You are determined?

*Philoctetes*

More than words can declare

*Neoptolemus*

I wish that I could have persuaded you.  
If I cannot speak to some purpose, I have done.

*Philoctetes*

You will say it all  
to no purpose, for you will never win my heart  
to friendship with you, who have stolen my life  
by treachery, and then came and preached to me,  
bad son of a noble father. Cursed be you all,  
first the two sons of Atreus, then Odysseus,  
and then yourself!

1280

*Neoptolemus*

Do not curse me any more.  
Take your bow. Here I give it to you.

*Philoctetes*

What can you mean? Is this another trick?

*Neoptolemus*

No. That I swear by the holy majesty  
of Zeus on high!

*Philoctetes*

These are good words,  
if only they are honest.

1290

*Neoptolemus*

The fact is plain.  
Stretch out your hand; take your own bow again.

(*Odysseus appears.*)

*Odysseus*

I forbid it, as the Gods are my witnesses,  
in the name of the Atridae and the Greeks.

*Philoctetes*

Whose voice is that, boy? Is it Odysseus?

*Odysseus*

Himself and near at hand.  
And I shall bring you to the plains of Troy  
in your despite, whether Achilles' son  
will have it so or not.

*Philoctetes*

You will rue your word  
if this arrow flies straight.

*Neoptolemus*

No, Philoctetes, no!

1300

Do not shoot.

*Philoctetes*

Let me go, let go my hand, dear boy.

*Neoptolemus*

I will not.

(*Exit Odysseus.*)

*Philoctetes*

Why did you prevent me killing my enemy,  
with my bow, a man that hates me?

*Neoptolemus*

This is not to our glory, neither yours nor mine.

*Philoctetes*

Well, know this much, that the princes of the army,  
the lying heralds of the Greeks, are cowards  
when they meet the spear, however keen in words.

*Neoptolemus*

Let that be. You have your bow. There is no further cause  
for anger or reproach against me.

*Philoctetes*

None.

You have shown your nature and true breeding,  
son of Achilles and not Sisyphus.  
Your father, when he still was with the living,  
was the most famous of them, as now he is of the dead.

1310

*Neoptolemus*

I am happy to hear you speak well of my father  
and of myself. Now listen to my request.  
The fortunes that the Gods give to us men  
we must bear under necessity  
But men that cling wilfully to their sufferings  
as you do, no one may forgive nor pity.  
Your anger has made a savage of you. You will not  
accept advice, although the friend advises  
in pure goodheartedness. You loathe him, think  
he is your enemy and hates you.  
Yet I will speak. May Zeus, the God of Oaths,  
be my witness! Mark it, Philoctetes, write it in your mind.  
You are sick and the pain of the sickness is of God's sending  
because you approached the Guardian of Chryse,  
the serpent that with secret watch protects  
her roofless shrine to keep it from violation.  
You will never know relief while the selfsame sun  
rises before you here, sets there again,  
until you come of your own will to Troy,  
and meet among us the Asclepiadae,

1320

1330

who will relieve your sickness; then with the bow  
and by my side, you will become Troy's conqueror.

I will tell you how I know that this is so.

There was a man of Troy who was taken prisoner,  
Helenus, a good prophet. He told us clearly  
how it should be and said, besides, that all Troy  
must fall this summer. He said, "If I prove wrong  
you may kill me."

1340

Now since you know this, yield and be gracious.

It is a glorious heightening of gain.

First, to come into hands that can heal you,  
and then be judged pre-eminent among the Greeks,  
winning the highest renown among them, taking  
Troy that has cost infinity of tears.

*Philoctetes*

Hateful life, why should I still be alive and seeing?

Why not be gone to the dark?

What shall I do? How can I distrust  
his words who in friendship has counseled me?

1350

Shall I then yield? If I do so, how come  
before the eyes of men so miserable?

Who will say word of greeting to me?

Eyes of mine, that have seen all, can you endure  
to see me living with my murderers,

the sons of Atreus? With cursed Odysseus?

It is not the sting of wrongs past

but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

Men whose wit has been mother of villainy once  
have learned from it to be evil in all things.

1360

I must indeed wonder at yourself in this.

You should not yourself be going to Troy  
but rather hold me back. They have done you wrong  
and robbed you of your father's arms. Will you go and help them  
fight and compel me to the like?

No, boy, no; take me home as you promised.



Remain in Scyrus yourself; let these bad men  
die in their own bad fashion. We shall both thank you,  
I and your father. You will not then, by helping  
the wicked, seem to be like them

1370

*Neoptolemus*

What you say  
is reasonable; yet I wish that you would trust  
the Gods, my word, and, with me as friend, fare forth.

*Philoctetes*

What, to the plains of Troy, to the cursed sons  
of Atreus with this suffering foot of mine?

*Neoptolemus*

To those that shall give you redress,  
that shall save you and your rotting foot from its disease.

*Philoctetes*

Giver of dread advice, what have you said!

1380

*Neoptolemus*

What I see fulfilled will be best for you and me.

*Philoctetes*

And saying it, do you not blush before God?

*Neoptolemus*

Why should one feel ashamed to do good to another?

*Philoctetes*

Is the good for the Atridae or for me?

*Neoptolemus*

I am your friend, and the word I speak is friendly.

*Philoctetes*

How, then, do you wish to betray me to my enemies?

*Neoptolemus*

Sir, learn not to be defiant in misfortune.

*Philoctetes*

You will ruin me, I know it by your words.

*Neoptolemus*

Not I. You do not understand, I think.

*Philoctetes*

Do I not know the Atridae cast me away?

1390

*Neoptolemus*

They cast you away; will, now again, restore you.

*Philoctetes*

Never, if of my will I must see Troy.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall we do, since I cannot convince you  
of anything I say? It is easiest for me  
to leave my argument, and you to live,  
as you are living, with no hope of cure.

*Philoctetes*

Let me suffer what I must suffer.

But what you promised to me and touched my hand,  
to bring me home, fulfil it for me, boy.

Do not delay, do not speak again of Troy

1400

I have had enough of sorrow and lamentation.

*Neoptolemus*

If you will then, let us go.

*Philoctetes*

Noble is the word you spoke.

*Neoptolemus*

Brace yourself, stand firm on your feet.

*Philoctetes*

To the limit of my strength.

*Neoptolemus*

How shall I avoid the blame of the Greeks?

*Philoctetes*

Give it no thought.

*Neoptolemus*

What if they come and harry my country?

*Philoctetes*

I shall be there.

*Neoptolemus*

What help will you be able to give me?

*Philoctetes*

With the bow of Heracles.

*Neoptolemus*

Will you?

*Philoctetes*

I shall drive them from it.

*Neoptolemus*

If you will do what you say,  
come now; kiss this ground farewell, and come with me.

*(Heracles appears standing on the rocks above the cave of Philoctetes.)*

*Heracles*

Not yet, not until you have heard  
my words, son of Poias.

I am the voice of Heracles in your ears;

1410

I am the shape of Heracles before you.

It is to serve you I come and leave my home among the dead.

I come

to tell you of the plans of Zeus for you,

to turn you back from the road you go upon.

Hearken to my words.

Let me reveal to you my own story first,  
let me show the tasks and sufferings that were mine,  
and, at the last, the winning of deathless merit.

1420

All this you can see in me now.

All this must be your suffering too,

the winning of a life to an end in glory,

out of this suffering. Go with this man to Troy.

First, you shall find there the cure of your cruel sickness,  
and then be adjudged best warrior among the Greeks.

Paris, the cause of all this evil, you shall kill  
with the bow that was mine. Troy you shall take.  
You shall win the prize of valor from the army  
and shall send the spoils to your home,  
to your father Poias, and the land of your fathers, Oeta  
From the spoils of the campaign you must dedicate  
some, on my pyre, in memory of my bow.

1430

Son of Achilles, I have the same words for you.  
You shall not have the strength to capture Troy  
without this man, nor he without you,  
but, like twin lions hunting together,  
he shall guard you, you him I shall send Asclepius  
to Ilium to heal his sickness. Twice  
must Ilium fall to my bow. But this remember,  
when you shall come to sack that town, keep holy in the sight of  
God.

1440

All else our father Zeus thinks of less moment.  
Holiness does not die with the men that die.  
Whether they die or live, it cannot perish.

*Philoctetes*

Voice that stirs my yearning when I hear,  
form lost for so long,  
I shall not disobey.

*Neoptolemus*

Nor I.

*Heracles*

Do not tarry then.  
Season and the tide are hastening you on your way.

1450

*Philoctetes*

Lemnos, I call upon you:  
Farewell, cave that shared my watches,  
nymphs of the meadow and the stream,

the deep male growl of the sea-lashed headland  
where often, in my niche within the rock,  
my head was wet with fine spray,  
where many a time in answer to my crying  
in the storm of my sorrow the Hermes mountain sent its echo! 1460  
Now springs and Lycian well, I am leaving you,  
leaving you.

I had never hoped for this.  
Farewell Lemnos, sea-encircled,  
blame me not but send me on my way  
with a fair voyage to where a great destiny  
carries me, and the judgment of friends and the all-conquering  
Spirit who has brought this to pass.

*Chorus*

Let us go all  
when we have prayed to the nymphs of the sea 1470  
to bring us safe to our homes. 1471